

The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar*

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

13



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"...By a
whisker."

A spear shaft,
interposing itself
between the two
of them, just
barely stopped
Sígismund's
blow.

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**The captive
Rífa will—**

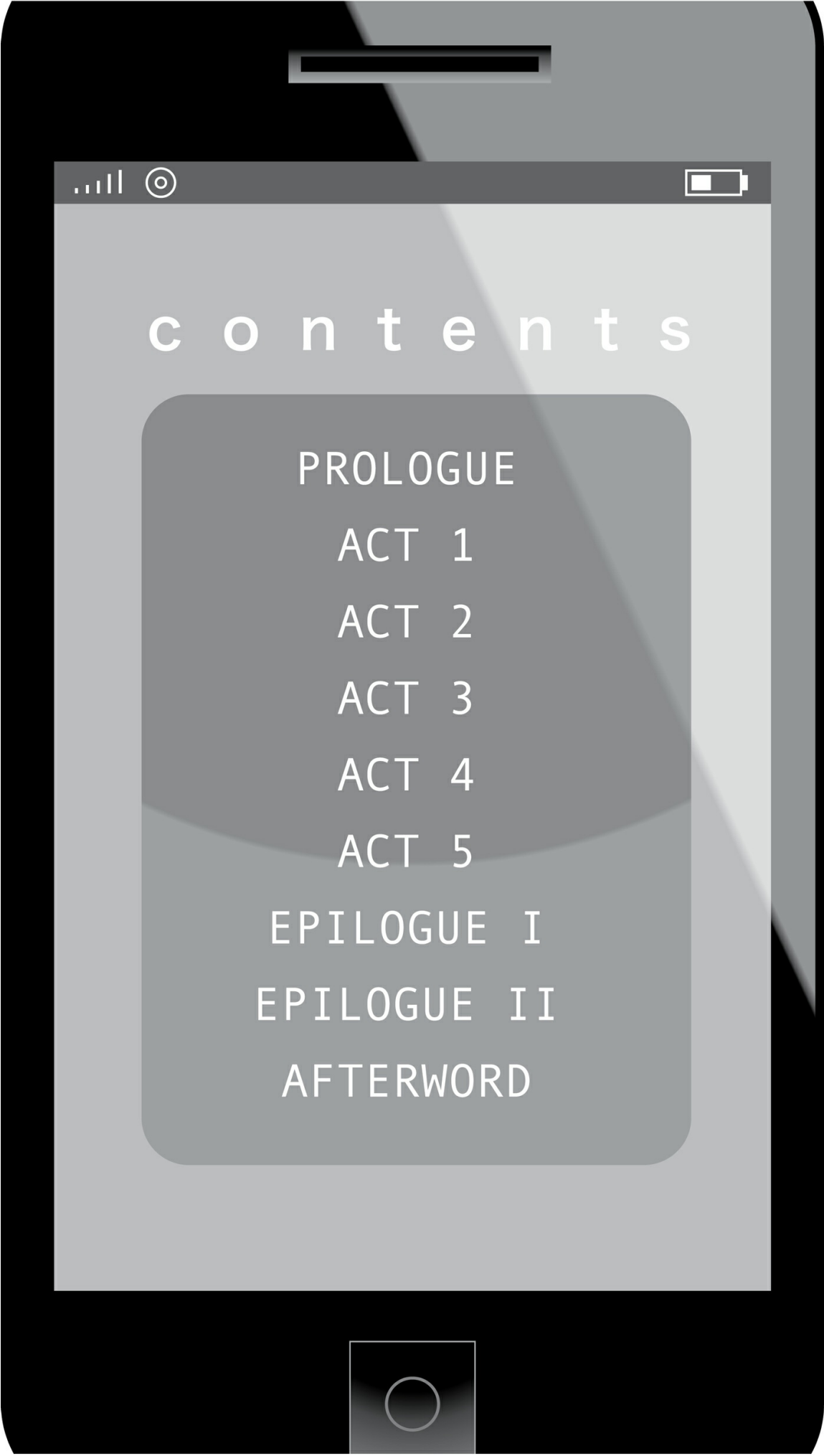
**When
Mitsuki's
twin runes
glimmer,**



"Fighting Alone"

A mountain of captives meant a mountain of administrative work. Securing enough food for them, determining where to place them, all the little details that were needed to keep them in place.

—The administrative tasks on the front were, necessarily, left to Felicia.



c o n t e n t s

PROLOGUE

ACT 1

ACT 2

ACT 3

ACT 4

ACT 5

EPILOGUE I

EPILOGUE II

AFTERWORD

Characters

A character with long, flowing blonde hair and a white dress with a high collar and long sleeves.

Felicia

Yuuto's adjutant, and sworn younger sister. She is an Einherjar with the all-purpose rune, Skirnir, the Expressionless Servant.

A character with short, spiky blonde hair and a dark dress with a white sash.

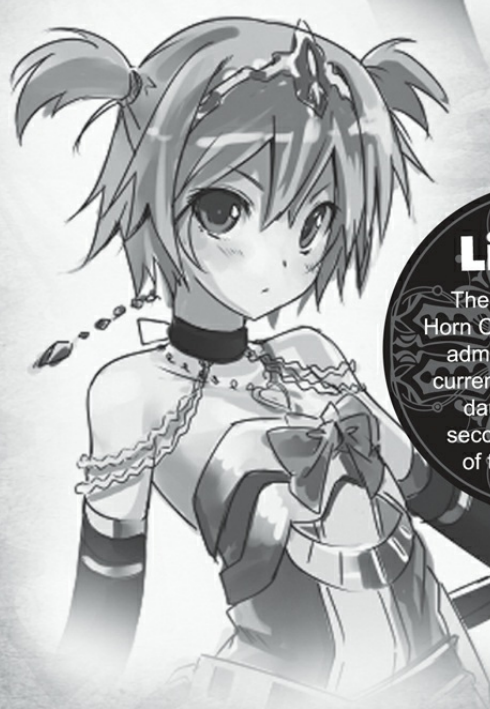
Sigrún

Yuuto's sworn daughter, a soldier and Einherjar of the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon. She holds the title of Máhagarmr, given only to the Wolf Clan's strongest warrior.

A character with dark, spiky hair and a dark, high-collared coat with a large white feather on the shoulder.

Yuuto Suoh

A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. As the sovereign of his newly-created Steel Clan, he now rules over multiple subordinate clans as the reginarch, or "Great Lord."

A character with short blonde hair in pigtails, wearing a dark dress with a white sash and a choker.

Linnea

The patriarch of the Horn Clan and a talented administrator. She is currently Yuuto's sworn daughter and the second-in-command of the Steel Clan.

A character with short blonde hair and a dark dress with a white sash and a headband.

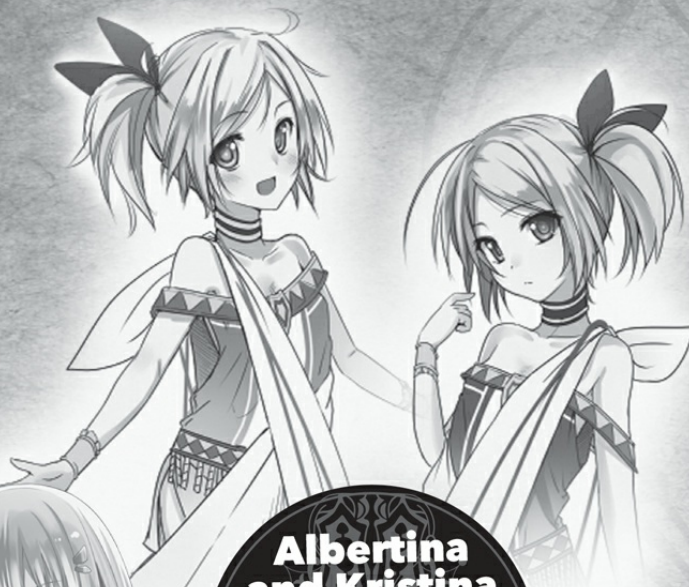
Ingrid

Yuuto's sworn daughter, and chief blacksmith of the workshop which produces weapons and other items for the Wolf Clan. She is an Einherjar with the rune Ivaldi, Birther of Blades.



Mitsuki Shimoya

Yuuto's soulmate and childhood friend. Committing to living her life with Yuuto, she became a resident of Yggdrasil through Felicia's summoning ritual.



Albertina and Kristina

Twin daughters of the Claw Clan Patriarch. Kris and Al for short. Kristina lives to tease her care-free sister Albertina.



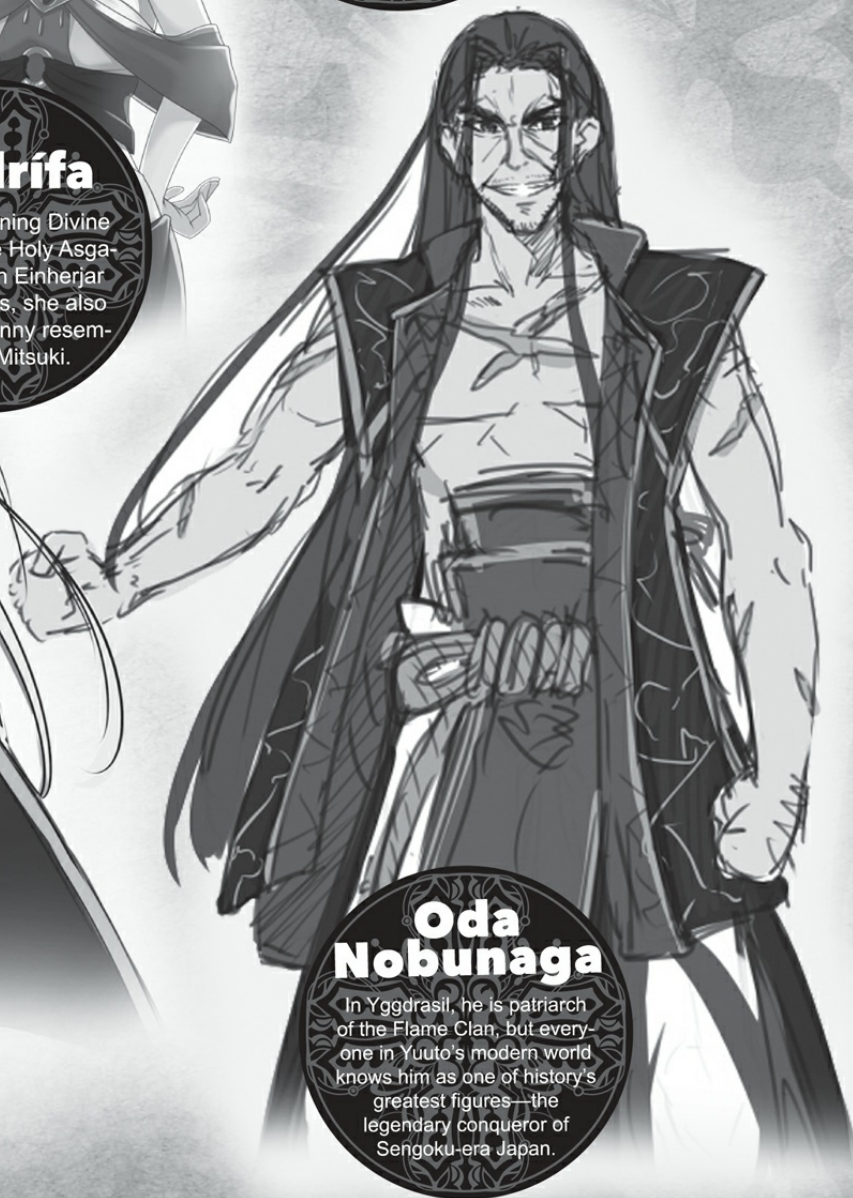
Sigdrífa

The 13th Reigning Divine Empress of the Holy Asgardor Empire. An Einherjar with twin runes, she also bears an uncanny resemblance to Mitsuki.



Hveðrungr

An Einherjar with the rune Alþjófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. Under the mask, he is Felicia's brother by birth, Loptr.



Oda Nobunaga

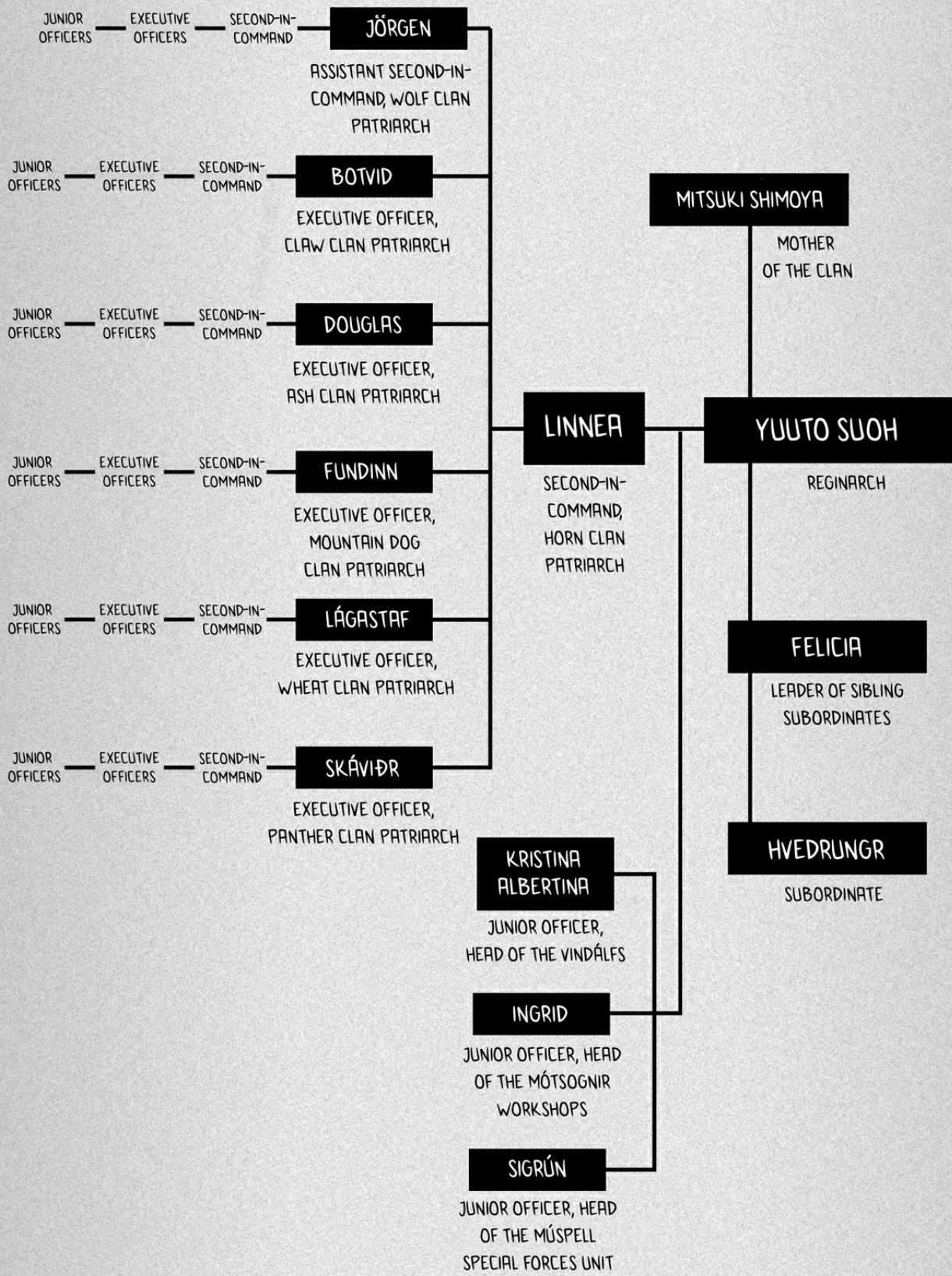
In Yggdrasil, he is patriarch of the Flame Clan, but everyone in Yuuto's modern world knows him as one of history's greatest figures—the legendary conqueror of Sengoku-era Japan.



MAP OF THE MAJOR CLANS
AND THEIR AREAS OF INFLUENCE

HELHEIM REGION

HIERARCHY OF THE STEEL CLAN



PROLOGUE

Hárbarth, the High Priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire and patriarch of the Spear Clan.

Death was a constant companion throughout his life.

He was born to a poor farming family and had to scrape by to survive each day. Some days he would wake up to find his siblings had suddenly vanished. He lived under the constant fear that he would be next.

When his rune awoke at the age of ten, he finally escaped the fear of starvation through service, but the world remained in an era of war where only the strong survived.

Facing uncounted numbers of blood-soaked battlefields, death slowly claimed the lives of his comrades, and there were countless times when he, himself, faced down his own end.

He took a wife and had three children, looking to escape the constant nagging fear that his existence could end at any moment. The birth of his children who would carry on his bloodline eased some of that fear.

But his happiness didn't last long. The enemy invaded their territory and slaughtered his wife and children. Facing the silent bodies of his family, he came to a realization.

The reason he was consumed by fear, the reason he lost his family... was because he lacked power. Power would keep him from suffering fear, suffering loss. He had obsessively sought power ever since.

His rune Svipall, the Shapeshifter, could possess the minds of lesser creatures with a lower level of self-awareness. In his youth, when he still sought glory on the battlefield with his spear, he had cursed the gods for granting him an ability that felt useless in that pursuit.

But with experience came a better understanding of what mattered. And with that understanding, he found out just how useful his power could be.

Information was a far more potent weapon than any sword or spear.

He sold favors to those seeking advice, he held the strong hostage to their faults, and gradually he climbed the ranks, until he found himself in the position of High Priest of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, near the very pinnacle of power on Yggdrasil.

Any and all people sought his advice and knelt before him. Even the þjóðann dared not cross him.

He had finally found peace—

—Or so he had thought. But another threat reared its ugly head.

Old age.

One day he found himself noticing just how heavy a plate felt in his hand. Just how difficult it was for him to just stand up. His body ached, from his hips to his knees.

The ‘death’ that he had put so much effort into defeating was once again at his doorstep.

“I don’t want to die...”

Just as he had finally, at long last, found security. Just when he thought he could start living again...

He couldn’t stand the thought of losing it all. Fortunately, he had the power to prevent that from coming to pass.

“I won’t let it end like this. No, not like this...!”

ACT 1

“Sieg lárn! Sieg lárn!”

“Sieg Reginarch! Sieg Reginarch!”

Celebratory cheers declaring victory rung out across the plains surrounding Vígríðr.

The Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army fielded by the five clans—Sword, Spear, Fang, Cloud, and Helm—in response to the imperial subjugation order counted nearly thirty thousand in their ranks. Facing them, the Steel Clan had mustered a little over ten thousand. Their victory was doubtless a remarkable one against overwhelming odds.

Relief and joy illuminated the faces of the celebrating soldiers, but the expression of the young man who had contributed most to the victory, Suoh Yuuto, reginarch of the Steel Clan, remained clouded.

“Kris! Send word to all units! Have them make their casualty reports and treat their wounded. Reorganize those that can still fight and prepare to pursue the retreating forces!”

Yuuto barked orders into the transceiver in his hand.

Certainly, the battle had been decided.

But the reality was that they had used their momentum to repel the enemy army. Even now the Alliance Army maintained an absolute numerical advantage over the Steel Clan.

Yuuto himself was most aware that his victory thus far was fragile; resting on a knife’s edge.

“Rún, I’ve got one more task for you today. I need you to immediately join in the pursuit.”

“As you command!”

A strong voice rang back through the transceiver.

That voice belonged to Sigrún, the woman known as the Mánagarmr, the greatest warrior of the Steel Clan, commander of their elite armored cavalry unit, the Múspell unit.

“Do whatever you must to capture the Sword Clan patriarch, Fagrahvél. We can’t afford any further problems arising.” Yuuto made clear the seriousness of the mission he was tasking her with.

“As you wish, Father. I shall do as you command!” Sigrún was quick to respond and duly accept her sworn father’s order.

“I’m counting on you.”

The Sword Clan patriarch, Fagrahvél, was effectively the leader of the Alliance Army. As an Einherjar with the rune Gjallarhorn, she could turn even the most rank-and-file soldier into a peerless hero who would charge fearlessly into battle. Yuuto understood from facing her just how much of a threat she represented.

While he may have defeated her this time, she was an opponent Yuuto didn’t want to face a second time.

It didn’t take a great leap of the imagination to understand that if she escaped and could regroup the Alliance Army’s forces, the situation would take a rapid turn for the worse.

Furthermore, she had lost with an army of thirty thousand. There was a strong possibility she would now avoid field battles and take shelter behind fortress walls.

Yuuto wanted to avoid that scenario at all costs.

Even with siege weaponry far ahead of its time, it was rather obvious that conquering the Sword Clan through a siege would cost the Steel Clan a substantial amount of time.

With the knowledge that Yggdrasil would soon sink into the sea, that was time they couldn’t afford to waste.

The pursuit of Fagrahvél could very well decide the course of events over the coming days.

A series of four loud gongs rang out across the battlefield, above the din of yelling soldiers and fighting.

Sígismund, the patriarch of the Fang Clan, ruler of central Bifröst, froze in place, and his eyes widened in surprise.

The army had, of course, decided what those gongs would signal well before the battle had begun.

In war, any misunderstanding of signals being sent could very well lead to defeat. Sígismund, who had risen to his position as patriarch through sheer ability, knew this better than most.

This was exactly why he had thoroughly committed the signals to memory. It was impossible that he would misunderstand a signal.

Impossible though it was for him to misunderstand this signal, he still struggled to process what he was hearing.

Four gongs in a row meant—

“All forces retreat?!”

To him, this order came completely out of the blue.

His Fang Clan forces, numbering around five thousand, were currently in the midst of assaulting the Steel Clan’s flank, and while they were slowed by the enemy’s Wagon Walls and hampered by reinforcements from skirmishers, they were still winning their slice of the battle.

Even looking upon the battlefield as a whole, the remaining twenty-five thousand troops of the Alliance Army had encircled the much-smaller force of ten thousand Steel Clan troops, and further, the soldiers of the Alliance Army were all fighting like legendary heroes thanks to the power of the Sword Clan’s patriarch, Fagrahvéll.

Up until a moment ago, Sígismund believed victory to be little more than a matter of time.

“Hm?”

Sígismund noticed that the expressions of the soldiers protecting him had changed.

Mere heartbeats ago they had looked like wild beasts, with fire burning in their eyes, but now, upon hearing the signal to retreat, all of them looked like frightened cattle.

“...Fagrahvél’s rune has worn off.”

This could only mean that Fagrahvél herself was in no condition to make use of that power.

“Going by the timing of the gong signal, it is very likely that Fagrahvél has either been slain or captured.”

Furrowing his brow, Sígismund let out a grumble.

Fagrahvél had, in fact, only lost consciousness and was currently retreating from the battlefield, but Sígismund had no way of knowing this, being neither a god nor a seer. Under the circumstances, Sígismund’s assumption was perfectly reasonable.

“Tch. Fall back!”

His cloak flowing as he turned away, Sígismund barked out that order.

With the battle decided, there was no time to waste.

While the Fang Clan army had suffered very few losses and still had much of its strength intact, maintaining morale would likely prove impossible with the gong for retreat sounded and the effects of Fagrahvél’s rune having worn off.

The longer they stayed on the battlefield, the greater the confusion and panic among the soldiers would be.

To keep as many of his soldiers alive as possible, Sígismund knew it was best to retreat while his forces maintained their cohesion.

Sígismund’s judgment was both correct and swift.

Unfortunately for him—

“Gah!”

“Oomph!”

“Ack!”

Screams rang out from the Fang Clan army’s flank.

From a distance, Sígismund caught sight of a group of mounted warriors attacking with spears.

“The Múspell unit...”

They were the cursed band that kept appearing on the battlefield, interrupting every opening that Sígismund had found.

“Dammit! For them to appear now...!”

Sígismund couldn’t help but curse under his breath.

An all-cavalry unit that went against all of the accepted understanding of war in Yggdrasil; Sígismund had already suffered greatly at the hands of their impressive mobility and power during this battle.

Given that they were on the cusp of retreat, this opponent was one he would have gladly avoided.

“Hurry! It’s past time we made our exit!” Sígismund urged on his chariot driver.

In the eyes of his subordinates, a patriarch abandoning his post and focusing on his own escape must seem like a despicable act of cowardice. Yet, for a patriarch, surviving at all costs and making his way back to his own territory was the duty he owed to his people.

If, in addition to this great defeat, Sígismund were to be slain, the Fang Clan would be mired in further confusion and decline.

“Faster, dammit! Run them as fast as they’ll go!”

“They’re already running as fast as possible. Any more and...”

“Save your excuses! Faster, damn you!” Chastising the driver, Sígismund turned fretfully backward, his expression tensing. Several black-clad riders were riding straight at him. They had clearly identified him and chosen him as their target.

Even considering the confusion brought by the retreat and the

disorganization, their ability to cut so quickly through the five thousand making up the ranks of the Fang Clan's army could only be described as menacing.

"Grrrah... Grrr." Sígismund couldn't help but grind his teeth together.

The three horses pulling his chariot were three of the finest horses of the Fang Clan. At a gallop they would easily leave others behind. Yet in spite of that, the enemy cavalry were quickly closing the distance.

"Out of the way!"

"Whaaa?! Guh!"

Thud! Shoved off of the chariot, the driver fell to the ground.

A thoroughly ruthless act, but with one less rider the chariot quickly accelerated. Now was not the time for niceties. But even that mattered little in the end...

Whoosh! Crack!

An object cut through the air, and a heavy jolt impacted the chariot. The carriage suddenly collapsed leftward, and Sígismund was thrown to the ground.

"Guh!"

Sígismund rolled with the impact and somehow settled on his feet.

He caught a glimpse of his beloved chariot, overturned with a spear caught in its wheel. From beyond that, the enemy cavalry approached, kicking up dust in their wake.

"I am Hildegard, member of the Steel Clan's Múspell unit! I take thee to be Sígismund, patriarch of the Fang Clan! I hereby challenge thee!"

A young woman, with pig-tails that looked completely out of place on the battlefield, identified herself and began swinging an enormous spear that looked far too large for her small frame.

"Dammit!"

Though his body ached, likely from his fall, Sígismund clamped down on the pain with sheer force of will, drawing the sword on his hip and catching Hildegard's blow upon it.

“Umph?!”

The impact knocked Sígismund several steps backward. It was a heavy blow that didn't seem possible from a woman, a blow undoubtedly by an Einherjar—one blessed by the gods.

“I'm not done yet!”

The young woman continued her attack, not leaving Sígismund any opportunity to regain his footing.

Her attacks were efficient, sharp, and quick. It was the kind of movement of one who not only was gifted with innate talent, but also had spent great amounts of time refining their skills with practice. She was, without a doubt, a worthy foe.

However—

“I'll not lose to some mere slip of a girl!” Sígismund barked out, quickly turning his body to the side, avoiding Hildegard's lightning-quick lunge and deflecting the spear shaft with the gauntlet on his left arm.

“Raah!”

Showing no concern for the mass of horseflesh in front of him, he stepped forward, just barely avoiding the charging animal. Sígismund's sword flashed as he struck out with a sideward slash.

Blood sprayed from a wound on the young woman's mount; the horse collapsing as it bled from its left flank.

With an odd exclamation of surprise, the girl was, herself, now thrown to the ground.

While there had been fewer opportunities for him to fight directly in recent battles, Sígismund was, by all merits, still an Einherjar and a seasoned warrior. He had built up great amounts of experience from spending over ten years fighting and surviving across countless battlefields.

The girl in front of him was certainly strong for her age, but she was still no match for him.

“Owww!”

Evidently she'd taken a heavy blow to her back, and Hildegard remained on the ground, her face twisted in pain.

From the fact that she wasn't standing back up, it appeared that the pain was so great that she couldn't bring herself to her feet.

Sígismund was not one to pass up such an opportunity.

More than anything, there were other enemies around him. He was still in a dangerous situation; he needed to finish off the opponent in front of him, reducing the number of enemies, or else it could very well cost him his life.

"I don't enjoy killing girls, but such is war," Sígismund stated plainly, as though trying to convince himself.

He slashed at the girl, aiming for her neck to at least give her the mercy of a quick death.

"Eep!"

The girl's expression twisted in terror at death's approach—

—But the blade never reached the girl's body.

A spear shaft, interposing itself between the two of them, just barely stopped Sígismund's blow.

"...By a whisker."

Looking up, a silver-haired woman a few years older than Hildegard was letting out a long sigh atop her horse.

She, like Hildegard, was slender, but her aura was another matter entirely.

There was no arrogance or haughtiness to her frosty features, and her thoroughly sharpened presence was enough to even give Sígismund a moment's pause.

"M-Mother!"

Hildegard's expression, which had been frozen in fear, instantly thawed into an expression of relief.

Sígismund had heard of this woman before...

At the arrival of the Múspell unit's commander and the Mánagarmr, said to be the greatest of the Steel Clan's warriors, even Sígismund felt a shiver run up his spine.

"To think... Such a thing would happen..."

At the ringing of the gongs, Spear Clan assistant second-in-command Hermóðr's expression, much like Sígismund's, turned very tense.

He was, perhaps, in his mid-thirties. Though slender, he was a man with a tough, well-trained body and facial features to match. He was one of the Spear Clan's greatest generals, known by the nickname of "Hermóðr the Swift."

He had remained quiet during the war council meeting prior to the battle, remaining obscure among the gathering, but that was because he was aware that everything was proceeding according to the plans set by his liege, Lord Hárbarth.

A general should always display caution. To speak is to provide information. Observant individuals can discover the truth from even the smallest details. Those gathered at the war council meeting had been the elite of the elite from the participating clans. In fact, the chatty Alexis had given away the limits of Hárbarth's powers through his unguarded statements.

Even to one as cunning as Hermóðr, the current news was a bolt out of the blue.

But experience had taught him that anything could happen on a battlefield. As such, he was quick to adapt his mindset.

"Now, what to do..." Hermóðr gazed up at the sky while muttering to himself.

At a glance, it appeared as though he was caught up in despair, but that was most assuredly not the case. His gaze was fixed on a single crow making its way toward him.

The crow eventually landed upon Hermóðr's left shoulder.



“Hermóðr.” The crow spoke.

It was certainly an obvious oddity, but Hermóðr’s expression showed not a single trace of surprise.

“Yes, Father. My sincere apologies for not meeting your expectations.” Moreover, he even respectfully bowed his head toward it.

This crow was, in fact, the patriarch of the Spear Clan and the effective ruler of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, the High Priest Hárbarth.

Or, more precisely, it was a vessel possessed by his soul.

Hermóðr was one of the few people aware that Hárbarth was an Einherjar who wielded the rune Svipall, and was capable of possessing various animals.

“You bear no responsibility. The Black One... I didn’t expect him to be that absurd. His abilities are far beyond what I expected.”

“As you say. I did not even in my wildest dreams think we would lose with our assembled forces.”

At Hárbarth’s words, Hermóðr could only agree with a sour expression plastered across his face.

Having spent twenty years at war after his first battle at the age of fifteen, Hermóðr was well aware there were no certainties in war.

But even then, he couldn’t believe that a combination of Hárbarth’s information, Fagrahvél’s power, Bára’s stratagems, and—most importantly—a force of twenty-five thousand that numbered more than twice that of the enemy could be defeated so easily.

More incredulous even than that was the fact that the one who had accomplished this feat was a boy of just seventeen, less than half his own age.

Hermóðr’s body couldn’t help but tremble at the thought of what sort of monster this boy could possibly be.

“Mm, we must come up with an appropriate response. At this rate, the Steel Clan will soon swallow not only the empire, but our Spear Clan as well.”

“...It is as you say.” Furrowing his brow, Hermóðr could only nod in agreement

at Hárbarth's observation.

With this victory, many would see that the tide had shifted. Seeing which way the wind was blowing, many clans would be likely to jump onto the Steel Clan's bandwagon, at which point, the Steel Clan would become completely unstoppable.

"However, I have no intention of twiddling my thumbs as they trample all over us," Hárbarth stated, a plan quickly formulating in his mind.

"Yes, of course," Hermóðr replied.

Hermóðr was well aware of what happened to the people of a conquered country. The country of his birth, and the people of that country... Hermóðr loved both dearly. He couldn't expose them to such inhumane treatment.

"The first priority is to save as many of our soldiers as possible. I will lead, come along."

Those words were the most reassuring thing Hermóðr could hear at this time.

Hárbarth possessed wings, and, as such, he could look down upon the ground from high up in the air.

It was a simple task for him to find the safest retreat route, leading Hermóðr away from the pursuing forces, thus making them hard to find as they made their escape.

Crack! Snap!

From atop her speeding chariot's carriage, Bára continued to crack her whip.

Anyone familiar with her usual demeanor would have stared in shock upon witnessing her current expression.

She had always remained calm and maintained a gentle smile on her lips when serving as a Sword Clan general, but she now had a grim expression drawn across her face, betraying the depths of her anxiety.

In truth, she was in as much peril as she had ever been in her life.

"For goodness saaaakes... This has nooot gone according to plaaan," she muttered to herself, stealing glances back at her cargo. There slept her mistress,

the patriarch of the Sword Clan, Fagrahvél.

Until a few moments ago she had been leading the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army, wielding an unprecedented force that numbered a massive thirty thousand as though they were her very own hands and feet. Now, she was the defeated general of an army, left fleeing with only a handful of troops in tow.

This, however, had not occurred because Fagrahvél lacked skill in the art of war.

Even accounting for her own bias, Bára thought of her mistress as an enormously talented patriarch. Even after she'd suffered this historic defeat, her faith in Fagrahvél hadn't wavered in the slightest.

No, it was just that, this time, they had fought the wrong opponent.

"For the loooove of all that is hoooly... What a moonster... Just what is heeee?"

With Fagrahvél's trump card, the rune of kings—Gjallarhorn, the Call to War—their troops, who had practically become legendary heroes, had been repelled in a head-on battle and quickly defeated.

Even with them harnessing the strategic power of Hárbarth's ability, which had earned him the appellation of Skilfingr, the Watcher from on High—an ability that had so often caused frustration for Bára and her comrades—they had still had been handily outdone by that god of war.

Bára, who had inwardly considered herself one of the five greatest strategists on the entire continent, had seen all of the stratagems she'd skillfully woven using Hárbarth's power easily—so very easily—defeated.

And then there were the weapons. Powerful, unprecedented weapons that had appeared suddenly on the battlefield. If all of them were creations of the Steel Clan reginarch Suoh-Yuuto...

"...He's not huuman. Could those rumooors have been truuue?!"

Bára couldn't stop a shudder of fear from running up her spine.

Suoh-Yuuto, the Steel Clan reginarch, had been sent by the goddess Angrboða herself to save the Wolf Clan from its impending doom.

It was a rumor she'd heard numerous times.

Bára had dismissed it as little more than propaganda, as rulers often spread such things to justify their reign, but having now thoroughly experienced the man's terrifying presence on the battlefield herself, she could no longer regard it as mere myth.

"Buuuut we're not just going to let him waaalk all over us."

Even as her expression tensed from fear and stress unlike anything she'd ever felt before, Bára still managed a laugh, forcing herself onward.

She was now the last of the Maidens of the Waves, the Sword Clan's elite force of nine Einherjar. Her companions with whom she had shared in both great joy and sorrow had, at her orders, gone into battle and ended up as captives.

Bára was well aware of what happened to women who were captured on the battlefield. Imagining what humiliations they faced now, she felt her blood run cold and wanted to tear out her hair in self-hatred.

No matter how powerful the enemy, she would never be able to face them if her spirit broke here.

"At the very leaaast, I neeeded to get Fagrahvél to saaafety," Bára, her tone leisurely but her expression determined, muttered to herself.

She believed that this was her *final duty* as the Maiden who had shamefully remained as the last one standing.

Clang!

Clank! Clang!

"Yaaaaah!"

"Grrrah!"

On another corner of the battlefield, Sigrún and Sígismund's exchange of spear thrusts continued. Little separated the two in terms of strength, speed, and skill. The exchange of blows escalated, but...

“Yah! Hah! Hrph!”

“Grr! Gumph! Raaah!”

The battle eventually began to tilt in Sigrún’s favor, and her attacks were gradually putting Sígismund on the defensive.

Sígismund was a warrior whose name was legendary in Bifröst.

Legendary though he may be, he was still clearly a tier below heroes like Yngvi of the Hoof Clan or Hveðrungr of the Panther Clan, to say nothing of the monster that was the Lightning Clan’s Steinþórr.

He was no match for Sigrún, who had tested her mettle in hard-fought battles against those very foes.

Or rather, that should have been the case...

The one who was gasping and struggling for breath was Sigrún; the one who had appeared to have had the upper hand. Even as she gained the advantage, she couldn’t quite muster the strength to finish things.

“Heh.”

And despite being on the defensive, Sígismund wore a confident smile. It wasn’t that he had done anything in particular. But he had noticed.

“Tch.”

As the sweat poured from her and onto the ground, Sigrún clicked her tongue.

During the earlier portions of the battle, the Múspell unit had been employed as skirmishers, continually fighting across the breadth of the battlefield. Even she, the greatest warrior of the Steel Clan, was only mortal. Fatigue gripped her body, leaching the edge from her movements.

“Where’s your spirit from earlier, girl?! It would seem you’re tiring!” Sígismund barked out, in an attempt to taunt her.

“Grr!”

From that reaction, it would appear the taunt had had the intended effect.

Having seen his chance, Sígismund went on the offensive.

He freely swung his spear, using his momentum to press home his advantage.

“Come on! Is this all there is to the infamous Mánagarmr?” Sígismund continued his verbal barrage.

“Grr! Guh! Mrph!”

The flow of the battle changed in an instant, and Sigrún was forced to put herself on the defensive.

Her spear was much heavier than normal. Her body wouldn't respond as it usually would. She hadn't been able to access her trump card, the Realm of Godspeed.

For her body to struggle after so little... She couldn't contain her frustration at her own weakness.

“Guh?!”

And as Sígismund's attacks continued, he finally landed a blow that pierced through Sigrún's defenses, lightly grazing her shoulder. The shock of this attack jarred her such that she momentarily relaxed her stance.

“Got you!”

Sígismund was not going to miss out on such an opportunity. He lunged forward with a spear thrust aimed directly at Sigrún's heart, intending to end everything then and there—

“Hrph.”

However, Sigrún swiftly hopped onto her feet and easily evaded the strike. This was all part of her act.

It was true that Sigrún's physical reserves were depleted. It would be difficult, even for her, to overpower and break down Sígismund's defenses with brute force.

Which is why she chose to let her opponent go on the offensive and allowed him to create an opening by going for a killing blow.

No matter how quick and well-executed, if it was a blow that she'd coaxed her enemy into attempting, she could avoid it even without having her footing.

“What the?!”

And now, in front of Sigrún, was Sígismund, defenseless, wearing an expression of shock as his finishing blow missed completely.

By contrast, Sigrún’s lips quirked into a smile.

Because of his own magnificent strength, Sígismund had never faced opponents who could match him in that regard. Sigrún, however, had faced off against opponents of greater skill and learned how to survive in closely-matched battles. This difference made itself apparent.

“Hmph!”

“Guh!”

Sigrún thrust her spear into Sígismund’s chest in a single calm and calculated movement. His chest almost seemed to suck in the tip of Sigrún’s spear. The wound was clearly mortal.

Sigrún calmly pulled out her spear, held the blood-slicked tip to the heavens, and shouted.

“I have slain the Fang Clan patriarch Sígismund! If you value your lives, throw aside your weapons! Those that surrender will be guaranteed their lives. Our reginarch Suoh-Yuuto is merciful!”

Her announcement rung out like a bell, piercing through the din of the battlefield.

It appeared that the death of their patriarch had taken the already shell-shocked soldiers and driven them into even greater depths of despair. It had completely broken their spirit.

The Fang Clan soldiers had completely lost their will to fight. They began to throw their weapons to the ground, then sank into demoralized heaps near them.

There were some who fled, but many could no longer muster the strength of will to attempt even that.

“We’ve done it, Mother! Thank you so much for saving me earlier!” Hildegard said brightly, dashing up to Sigrún.

Sigrún, however, furrowed her brow and lightly tapped Hildegard's forehead with the butt of her spear.

"Ouch!"

"I suppose you saw your chance for glory, but you overextended yourself greatly. Do not do that again."

"Oww... Yes, ma'am." Hildegard nodded obediently, rubbing the now-sore spot on her head.

Ordinarily, her pride was perhaps her most distinguishing feature, but having been a heartbeat away from death, she seemed to be in a much more contrite mood.

Sigrún let out a soft laugh and softened her expression.

"Ordinarily there would be punishment... But it worked out for the best. I was able to catch Sígismund thanks to you, after all."

"Oh! Th-Thank you!" Hildegard's features immediately lit up.

"I-I suppose you're right, ma'am. Slaying him instead of letting him go is a big deal."

"Yes, so I'll let it pass, this time."

"Yes, thank you, ma'am! ...Heh. Yes indeed. The reason we found a general in this din was because of just how keen my nose and ears are! I'm a big freaking deal!"

Her thoughts spilled out from her lips. She could get carried away, and far too easily at that. Plus, she was careless. Sigrún could only shake her head at the girl's antics, though she didn't exactly dislike that part of her, either.

In the end, Sigrún had a certain amount of affection for her and wanted her to do well. That was why she had to occasionally bring down the hammer to keep her from going too far.

"You never do change, do you?" Sigrún said with an exasperated sigh, glancing toward Hildegard's crotch. For some reason it was soaked and stained. Likely as not, she had lost control of her bladder when Sígismund was about to kill her.

“Huh?” With a puzzled expression, Hildegard glanced down and checked herself. At that moment, her cheeks flushed red.

It seems in the excitement of battle she hadn’t noticed until just this moment.

“As a member of the honored Múspell unit, you really should fix that habit of wetting yourself.”

“N-Nooooooooooooooooo!” Hildegard’s mortified scream rang out amidst the cheering.

“Oh?”

As he stood atop the ramparts of Vígríðr, Hveðrungr let out a murmur of curiosity.

He was an odd-looking man, with long golden hair that cascaded down his back and a mask that hid half his face.

As the patriarch of the Panther Clan, he had faced off against Yuuto numerous times, and now as commander of the Independent Cavalry Regiment, he, along with the Claw and Ash Clan patriarchs, held the Ash Clan capital of Vígríðr.

“Sieg Reginarch! Sieg Reginarch!”

Cheers that appeared to be from the Steel Clan Army echoed from afar.

“Seems *he* has won again. Hrmph.” Despite his words, Hveðrungr’s tone conveyed disappointment. He was not annoyed that his side had won, by any measure. What *did* annoy him, though, was the fact that an opponent that had thoroughly made game out of him had been easily bested by Yuuto.

“Ah, well. Independent Cavalry Regiment! Prepare to move out!” Twirling his cape as he turned to his subordinates, Hveðrungr called out his orders.

Vígríðr was currently surrounded by the army of the Cloud Clan, one of the clans that made up the Alliance Army’s forces. However, with the Steel Clan victorious in the battle between the main armies, it was likely they would start their retreat soon. With their overwhelming mobility, a retreating opponent was perfect prey for the Independent Cavalry Regiment. Hveðrungr believed in taking every opportunity to beat down the enemy when they avail themselves.

“Father, we’ve finished preparations. We can leave on your order!”

Though not yet recovered from their recent string of battles, the cavalry troops had rapidly prepared and assembled in front of the gate. It was an impressive display worthy of an elite unit that surpassed even the Múspell.

Hveðrungr found their eagerness for battle reassuring, but Douglas, the Ash Clan Patriarch, let his anxiety show.

“P-Please hold a moment, Uncle! Just what exactly is going on?!”

Vígríðr was the capital of Douglas’s Ash Clan, and the Independent Cavalry Regiment, boasting skilled archers within its ranks, was a keystone in its defense. If they were to mobilize recklessly and be lost, Vígríðr could very well fall soon after. That was, without a doubt, his primary concern.

But Hveðrungr couldn’t care in the slightest about that fact.

“Heh, no doubt you hear it as well, Lord Douglas. These cheers... This is the moment we’ve been waiting for,” Hveðrungr said with a sneer creeping across his face as he climbed atop his horse.

Douglas’s brow furrowed in irritation, but it was of no importance to Hveðrungr. Taking advantage of this opportunity was much higher on his priority list than Douglas’ feelings.

“B-But, we can’t be certain these are cheers of victory. There is the possibility that they are simply rallying the troops in preparation for tomorrow.”

The words were perfectly reasonable. The Steel Clan faced an army nearly three times its size. The normal course of action would be to assume that the Steel Clan troops were on the defensive and were attempting to rally themselves.

However, Hveðrungr dismissed these words and replied bluntly.

“Those are no rallying cries. They’re cheers of celebration.”

“...Where does your confidence come from? May I hear your reasoning?” Douglas continued, questioning Hveðrungr intently.

“Mm...” With a forced chuckle, Hveðrungr shrugged his shoulders.

From the moment he was born, Hveðrungr could sense the ‘color’ of letters and numbers, and of emotions.

It was only a vague sense when he had gone by the name of Loptr, Second-in-Command of the Wolf Clan, but it had become clearer to him around the time he had ascended to the position of patriarch of the Panther Clan.

Hveðrungr had no way of knowing, but this was what modern scholars refer to as synesthesia.

Depending on how it was wielded, it was an ability that, much like perfect pitch or savant syndrome, would let its wielder show overwhelming talent in their field.

It was a large part of what allowed Hveðrungr to imitate and learn techniques across a wide range of fields.

Hveðrungr could see that the cheers of the Steel Clan soldiers were lit with the bright orange of pure joy. If it were a rallying cry, there would be more uncertainty tinging the cheers, clouding the color.

However, Hveðrungr was well aware that this particular explanation would simply feed Douglas’ suspicion and get him nowhere.

“Having fought Big Brother Yuuto, I know his strength better than anyone. He is not a man to rely on a rallying cry on the first day of battle.” He made up a faintly convincing set of reasons.

There was a slight irritation in having to use Yuuto’s name, and referring to him as Big Brother still felt rather uncomfortable, but Hveðrungr was a man who could justify anything when the circumstances required it.

“H-Hrrm, I have heard much of Father’s abilities in war, but...”

“Now now. Let us do as our Uncle says and trust in Father.”

Douglas refused to be convinced, but here came help from an unexpected corner.

It was Botvid, patriarch of the Claw Clan.

While he appeared to be an uninspiring overweight man in his middle age, he was an annoyingly cunning man that had gotten the better of Hveðrungr dating

back to his days as Wolf Clan Second-in-Command.

“My ears agree with our Uncle’s interpretation.”

“Mrrrmph.” Douglas furrowed his brow and grunted.

Botvid wasn’t talking about his sense of hearing. It was well known throughout Bifröst that Botvid employed spies and had ‘ears’ providing him with information from all corners of the land.

“Vígríðr will still have the forces of the Ash Clan and our Claw Clan. We can withstand any amount of siege. And further, if this really is a rallying cry, then reinforcements to the main army are, if anything, more necessary,” Botvid continued.

“H-Hrm. Yes, you have a point.”

Douglas’ expression twisted into a sour one as he contemplated the situation.

If the main army were to lose, the Alliance Army’s main force would once again close upon Vígríðr. The capital’s fall would then be inevitable.

As for the possibility of breaking through the Cloud Clan’s encirclement, there was no other force with the mobility necessary to do it than the Independent Cavalry Regiment.

“Very well. Godspeed to you.”

Douglas gave his assent, even if it came somewhat reluctantly.

Hveðrungr couldn’t help but feel a bit conflicted at his old rival’s aid, but raised his voice to shout out his orders.

“All right! Independent Cavalry Regiment, we march! Let’s pay them back two-fold for all they’ve done!”

At around the same moment—

“Sieg Reginarch! Sieg Reginarch!”

“Mm?”

As the sudden rush of cheers assailed his ears, Gerhard, the Cloud Clan patriarch, furrowed his brow in suspicion.

He was a man about forty years of age, slender but well-toned, with fierce, intelligent eyes. He had, to date, defeated two other clans. He was a hero who had brought his clan far beyond where it had been under his predecessor.

“Hmph! I suppose they must be staging a rallying cry to overcome their disadvantage. Heh, I suppose it’s to be expected that the soldiers would lose heart facing those crazed berserkers.”

It certainly didn’t occur to Gerhard that they could be cheering celebrating victory.

The Alliance Army had an overwhelming numerical advantage over the Steel Clan’s army. Added to that were Fagrahvél and Hárbarth’s extraordinary powers.

No matter how powerful the Steel Clan’s boy leader was, there was no possibility of defeat. He could not have dreamed that the Alliance Army would be forced into a retreat within a single day.

With sunset approaching, Gerhard had instructed his soldiers to begin preparing their evening meals, and he himself was in a confiscated house, out of his armor, and taking a rest.

Siege warfare was a matter of endurance, and getting the proper amount of rest was an important part of the playbook. But this proved to be his undoing.

“I bring news! Th-The main army under Lady Fagrahvél’s command has been defeated by the Steel Clan Army!”

“...What?”

When he received the words from the exhausted messenger some time later, Gerhard could only respond with a look of utter surprise.

Gerhard was a man who had climbed to the position of patriarch of the Cloud Clan and was an intelligent man in his own right.

But like Sígismund, the sheer impossibility of the news he received meant it took him several moments to process what he’d just heard.

“D-Don’t be absurd. A loss with that kind of force is unthinkable...”

“B-But it’s the truth, sir. The Alliance Army is in retreat and the Steel Clan’s

main force is advancing upon this position! It's only a matter of time before they arrive!"

"Wha... Wha, what, wha...?!" Gerhard was unable to even form coherent words at the shocking news.

"Father! The bastards in the castle have mobilized! It's Hveðrungr!" A different soldier dashed in, anxiously relaying his news.

"What?!"

"The soldiers stationed by the gate are holding them off right now, but there's little more we can do. Hurry with the reinforcements!"

"Nrrrgh..." Gerhard let out a troubled grunt.

An hour earlier he would have regarded it as the last gasp of doomed soldiers and eagerly taken them on, but the situation had changed completely. The Steel Clan Army's main force was already near. It was imperative to get away from this location as quickly as possible, and there was no time to organize reinforcements.

In this case, they were facing the remnants of the Panther Clan, which combined overwhelming mobility and charging power. If he turned his back upon them without a force to cover it, they would feast upon his retreating forces.

He bitterly regretted his misjudgment of the cheering. If only he had ordered a retreat when he'd heard the Steel Clan's victory cheer...

It was far too late for regrets, though. It was a difficult situation, where he was left with no good choices. Moreover, time was of the essence, and Gerhard, the general, had to make a decision immediately.

"Grr... Very well! The soldiers by the gate are to remain engaged! Gather the remaining forces. Make all haste to leave this place!" Gerhard made his decision and gave out his orders.

"What?! Father?! Are we abandoning the ones at the gate?!" The second messenger stared at his patriarch in shock. Given that he didn't know of the Alliance Army's defeat, the reaction was perhaps only natural.

But there was no time to explain.

“Silence! My orders are final!”

After instructing his men appropriately, Gerhard hurried into his armor and rushed outside to take direct command of his army.

His decision was perfectly rational. On paper, it was the best possible order he could give. It was, in fact, a creditable decision under the circumstances, where he was cornered, with little time to make the call. A more typical general would have likely balked at the choices, wasting irreplaceable minutes.

However, the reality of the world is that rational decisions often trample over people’s emotions. The ones most caught by surprise were the soldiers fighting the Independent Cavalry Regiment by the gate.

“H-Hey, what’s going on?!”

“Why are they going that way instead of coming here?!”

“They’re abandoning us and running?!”

Serving as the rear guard during a retreat was an extremely dangerous role.

Ordinarily, those that are chosen for that role would secure promises that their loved ones back home would be cared for, and steel themselves such that they could defend their retreating comrades in the face of certain death. But those at the gate had none of that preparation. It was impossible for anyone to so abruptly accept that they’d become sacrificial pawns.

“Damned bastard! Abandoning your own children?!”

“Dammit! Screw this!”

“Let’s get out of here! We’re not dying here!”

As a result, they quickly fell into a panic. And fleeing soldiers with no stomach for fighting were no match for the Independent Cavalry Regiment, one of Yggdrasil’s most elite fighting units.

The cries of Sieg lárn rang out in Vígríðr as well.

“Good work hanging on until I got here!”

The moment he arrived in Vígríðr, Yuuto clapped his hands onto Douglas, the Ash Clan patriarch's shoulders, and offered him praise.

Morale was an extremely important consideration in war. Had they heard news that a key city had fallen before the decisive battle, the morale of the troops would have taken a devastating hit.

Vígríðr's fall may not have resulted in losing the battle, but would have at least made it much more difficult to win. His praise was understandably effusive.

"Y-You honor me, Father!" Douglas's voice trembled, as though overcome with emotion.

His own clan had been on the brink of extermination. Responsibility for the fate of his clan had weighed heavily upon his shoulders.

Then came his reginarch's grateful praise. It would have been harder for him not to be deeply moved.

"B-But I did not manage it by myself. My brother Botvid and my Uncle Hveðrungr's help were invaluable in doing so." Douglas' modesty took over, and as such, he felt it appropriate to share the credit for this success.

"Hm? Say, I haven't seen my masked brother about."

At Douglas' words, Yuuto glanced around curiously and tilted his head.

Hveðrungr and his followers, the Independent Cavalry Regiment, all stood out easily in a crowd. It was hard to think he had missed them.

"Uncle set out in pursuit of the fleeing Cloud Clan forces."

"I see. As I'd expect with his eye for opportunity." Yuuto smiled in admiration.

Hveðrungr's particular strength, the one that Yuuto believed in above all, was his observational skills. It seemed he had determined that this was a chance to secure victory.

"Somehow managed a win, I guess," Yuuto murmured to himself, speaking to no one in particular.

Tighten your helmet strings after a victory.

As the saying suggests, the most dangerous thing to do was to let your guard down after a victory. When engaged in the pursuit, Yuuto had been continually aware of the possibility that the retreat was a feint.

As that concern had faded and he had obtained certainty that victory was secured, he had, at last, started to realize that he had won.

“The ideal outcome would have been being able to capture Fagrahvél sometime today, but... Well, that’d be hoping for too much,” Yuuto sourly noted with a hint of self-deprecation.

The undeniable facts were that the Steel Clan Army had gone through a forced march and that the battle had been intense. The soldiers must be exhausted.

While they were able to push forward today because of their morale and the excitement of victory, when the adrenaline wore off the next morning, there would be those that would be overwhelmed by fatigue. At which point their pursuit speed would slow.

However, at the same time, they couldn’t afford to let Fagrahvél escape at any cost. It was a nagging problem for Yuuto.

“I have no choice but to rely on the cavalry I guess. I’m counting on you, Rún, masked brother.”

Yuuto was not at a place yet where he could relax.

“Sieg Eld! Sieg Eld!”

Countless Flame Clan standards were arrayed, and the rapturous shouts of soldiers rang out in Bilskírnir, the former capital of the Lightning Clan.

The throne that sat in the palace that dominated the center of the capital had welcomed its new master. He was a man with long, unruly black hair—a rarity in Yggdrasil—with a roguish air.

Despite being over sixty years in age, his expression and physique were overflowing with vitality, and at a glance, one would think him no more than forty.

The man's name was Oda Nobunaga.

He was a man who had once been on the cusp of unifying Warring States-era Japan, only to have fate draw him to Yggdrasil to become the patriarch of the Flame Clan.

It could only be called a peculiar twist of fate, but he himself was relishing the task of unifying the world under his banner from scratch.

"My lord, we have news from our spy we had inserted into the Ash Clan. The Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army numbering thirty thousand has taken the strategic linchpin Dauwe Castle and is advancing to the Clan Capital of Vígríðr!"

"Ah?" At his second-in-command Ran's words, Nobunaga's eyes glinted with interest.

He knew through experience that information was, at times, far more valuable than gold. Although it was in a far distant land, he had heard of the impenetrable Dauwe Castle.

"Heh. Seems that the Steel Clan's whelp has found himself in quite a predicament."

Nobunaga had already heard that the Steel Clan faced invasions from the Panther Clan remnants from the northwest and the Hoof Clan from the west.

Given that the Steel Clan would have to send forces to deal with those invasions, facing an army of thirty thousand was a formidable task. Added to that was the loss of a strategic citadel. It was a desperate situation, and one could only describe the Steel Clan as being on its last legs.

"Yet, I've seen the promise in him. The least he can do is survive this ordeal."

"Your lordship believes the Steel Clan will win?" Ran asked, brow furrowed in doubt.

His understanding of the situation wasn't wrong. Seen objectively, it was impossible for the Steel Clan to pull off an upset.

"Quite. Care to place a wager?" Nobunaga grinned impishly to his subordinate.

In truth, the Steel Clan had already defeated the Alliance Army, meaning

Nobunaga's read of the situation was accurate, but even he, a once-in-a-millennium talent, was only mortal. He certainly couldn't have seen that far ahead.

"...I'm afraid I must decline. I don't believe I've ever won a wager of this sort with you, my lord."

"How dull of you." Nobunaga furrowed his brow, as though his mood had soured.

Even the great warriors of the Flame Clan, who had survived countless battlefields, trembled in fear at the prospect of his displeasure, but Ran simply shrugged his shoulders with a soft laugh.

"Avoid wars you can't win. Fight only after you've secured the terms for victory. Both are things I learned from you, my lord."

"So they are."

Nobunaga's lips quirked in an amused smile. He was pleased with his protégé's response.

The fact that he approved of the content was one reason, but the other was the fact that he returned the quip without the faintest fear of his lord. It was that grit that he required in his second-in-command.

"Then you know what comes next?"

"Yes! Now is the time for us to make our way to the Imperial capital, Glāðsheimr."

"Indeed." Nobunaga nodded firmly.

Ten years had passed since his arrival in Yggdrasil. He had bided his time, strengthened his clan, and assembled an army totaling fifty thousand.

Having eliminated the Lightning Clan and signed a non-aggression pact with the Steel Clan, he had removed any sources of anxiety.

Time, place, and opportunity—all had come together.

Nobunaga looked to the sunlit western sky, the direction of the Imperial capital, and reached out his hand. He then balled his hand into a fist, as though

capturing something in his hand.

“My long-awaited ambition, the dream that had slipped through my grasp in my homeland... This time, we shall triumph!”

ACT 2

“...Dawn, eh?”

The sunlight he felt through his eyelids roused Hveðrungr from his slumber. It was hard to say he'd woken up refreshed. In fact, he was utterly exhausted.

“Sigh. The old limbs feel sluggish.”

A self-deprecating smile peeked onto the features visible beneath his mask.

He'd been fighting for several days straight. To top it all off, he had spent the entire day commanding the defense of Vígríðr, and then subsequently spent the night in pursuit of their fleeing enemy.

The four short hours he'd napped did little to abate all the fatigue he'd accumulated. He felt the urge to curl back under his blanket and return to sleep, but that wasn't an option.

“Wake up you lot! Nap time's over!” He yelled out words of ‘encouragement’ to the Independent Cavalry Regiment troops.

While they were usually quick to listen to Hveðrungr's orders, they were slow to respond on this particular morning. Like Hveðrungr, they were running on almost zero energy after the long string of battles. It was, perhaps, only natural they'd be tired.

Still, they eventually rose, readied themselves, and got into formation. After he gave them a once over, Hveðrungr opened his mouth to address them.

“It's hard to say we've accomplished much of note in this last war.”

The men thinned their lips into tense expressions and nodded heavily.

The truth was that the Independent Cavalry Regiment had fought magnificently in the defense of Vígríðr, so much so that, without them, the castle would have fallen. When all was said and done, though, they were still newcomers from a foreign land.

They all shared the desire to accomplish a feat so remarkable that it would

silence even the most ill-disposed of their critics.

“With battle after battle, I know you’re all tired. But now is when our fate as the Independent Cavalry Regiment will be decided!”

It was a rather theatrical speech, but it was true. What they, the Independent Cavalry Regiment, needed to do to truly make their name, was take the heads of the many Alliance Army commanders.

The Alliance Army featured the major leaders of the Fang, Cloud, Spear, and Sword Clans, and with their forces in full retreat, now was the perfect opportunity.

The strength of the Independent Cavalry Regiment was in its overwhelming mobility. Further to that, they were hunters that had been raised hunting their quarry upon the plains. Pursuit battles were where they shined.

“Let’s be off! Pillaging is our way! How can we maintain our honor as hunters if we remain under another’s care? We will win our place by our own hands!”

Hveðrungr made this final statement and promptly led the Regiment onto its next foray.

“Grr, where, where are they?!” Sigrún struggled with impatience as she spurred on her favored horse.

The Múspell unit was, like the Independent Cavalry Regiment, in the midst of pursuing the enemy, but they had yet to make their mark today.

While they had captured well over a thousand enemy troops, they were all ordinary soldiers. They had yet to find the most important target of all: Fagrahvél.

“The sun is setting soon. We need to catch up to them before that, at all costs...” Sigrún bit down on her lower lip with a tense expression.

Dauwe Castle was a stone’s throw away. The Múspell unit was made up entirely of elite veterans, but even for them, it’d be difficult to break through such a fortress with only five hundred or so troops.

It was imperative that they captured Fagrahvél’s convoy before they could

flee into the castle.

“Mm?”

Sigrún’s eyes took on a predatory gleam as she caught sight of a group of chariots racing ahead of her.

Chariots were one of the most advanced and expensive weapons in Yggdrasil. They took substantial funds to build and maintain, meaning only those above a certain station could afford to ride them. Given that there was a large group of them ahead, there was a very high probability that Fagrahvél was among them.

“Prepare for battle! We’re taking that group ahead!” Sigrún called out her order then spurred her horse.

Although chariots were typically the fastest means of travel on Yggdrasil, they were no match for cavalry. The Múspell unit rapidly closed the distance.

“Ah, we’ve finally found you!”

As her eye caught a chariot lavishly decorated with gold and silver, even Sigrún, known as the “Frozen Flower,” couldn’t help but break out into a wide grin. Upon its side was the crossed sword emblem of the Sword Clan. The rider was a young soldier encased in golden armor, matching the known description of Fagrahvél.

“Listen up, all of you! That is Fagrahvél! Don’t let them escape!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

With the enemy’s supreme commander in their sights, the Múspell troopers narrowed their eyes in determination.

The Múspell unit was a force renowned within the Steel Clan as its most elite unit, and all of its members were proud of their membership, but few of them had any intention of ending their careers as a mere field soldier.

Almost all of them dreamed of making a name for themselves, being recognized by the reginarch, and starting a faction all their own. This was a golden opportunity.

“Tch! The Silver Wolf! All! Defend his lordship at all costs!”

“You shall not pass!”

Those to the back of the group turned their chariots around and blocked the Múspell unit’s approach with grim determination. The two sides quickly clashed.

“Skillful as expected.” Sigrún furrowed her brow as she crossed spears with the enemy.

These soldiers were the honor guard of a great clan’s patriarch. They were strong enough to put up a fight against even the elite troops that made up the Múspell unit. To top it all off, they were engaged in a battle where they cared little for their own lives. Even Sigrún had her hands full with them.

Still, the honor guard forces found themselves completely outmatched.

“Gah!”

“Gack!”

Enemies that were willing to die to take an opponent with them were dangerous, but that only meant that they took extra care to dispatch.

The Múspell unit defeated them one by one, methodically chipping away at Fagrahvél’s defenses.

“Halt! There’s no escape for you! Surrender if you value your lives!” Finally catching up to Fagrahvél’s chariot, Sigrún yelled out that final warning.

There was simply too much of a speed difference between a chariot and a mounted soldier. There was also an enormous difference in fighting ability. From her perspective, it seemed inevitable, but her target evidently disagreed.

“Hrmph! To simply surrender would dishonor those who fell in my defense!” Fagrahvél was quick to respond in complete defiance.

“Then die by my spear!” With her offer of mercy declined, Sigrún no longer had to hold back.

She loosed a full-powered lunge at the soldier in golden armor—Fagrahvél.

“This is nothing!”

Clang!

The blow from Sigrún's spear was handily blocked and swept aside by Fagrahvél's lance, who then quickly followed up with a counterattack.

"Hmph!"

Sigrún calmly rotated her spear, making use of the extra momentum from the deflection, and blocked her opponent's attack. She then followed up with a flowing movement; a sweeping attack upon Fagrahvél's shoulder.

"Tch!"

Fagrahvél's expression twisted in pain. The blow, however, was far short of being a lethal wound.

She had slain countless opponents. She knew from feel alone that she had cut through armor rather than flesh. At most, she'd caused a flesh wound. It wouldn't impact the fight.

Still, Sigrún's lips curled upward as she reached a conclusion.

"You're no match for me." She'd realized this with that exchange.

Fagrahvél's 'power' was a remarkable ability for an Einherjar; one that could turn tens of thousands of soldiers into berserkers.

Expecting that ability to provide individual combat prowess would be asking for too much, though.

"Hyaaaaah!"

"Guh! Tch! Gah!"

Unable to withstand Sigrún's intense combination of three attacks, Fagrahvél's lance was deflected upward.

"Got you!"

Sigrún loosed her spear at Fagrahvél's wide-open torso—

Fwish!

Something cut through the air, causing Sigrún's mount to let out a cry and buck upward, its front legs momentarily leaving the ground.

"What the?!"

Sigrún tensed up at the unexpected turn of events.

The fact that she had let go of her reins to fight was now working against her. She slid off the back of her beloved mount. She somehow rolled into the landing, where she promptly noticed an arrow in her horse's right leg.

"We'll hold them off! Hurry!"

A chariot approached them, and a rather burly man on the carriage loosed more arrows at Sigrún.

Sigrún quickly jumped back, the arrows landing in the place she had been mere moments before.

"Simba! Thank you!"

Fagrahvél's chariot began to move further away. Sigrún's pursuit was stopped by the rain of arrows.

"Get out... of my way!"

Sigrún wasn't one to stay on the defensive, however. She dodged the arrows, picked up her discarded spear, and threw it with all her might.

"Whoa?! Gah!"

The spear destroyed the wheel upon Simba's chariot, and it swerved onto its side.

Simba couldn't escape in time and was pinned under the chariot. There was no one left to get in her way, but even Sigrún couldn't catch up to a chariot on foot.

"Leave the rest to me, Mother!"

Her young protégé Hildegard rushed past her from the flank. Soon after came the rest of the Múspell troops. They were all Sigrún's sworn children that she had molded into her own image. She knew better than anyone what they were capable of doing. She could leave the rest to them.

However, they were only a stone's throw away from Dauwe Castle. Having them hole up in that fortress would be quite the problem. That was something they had to avoid at all costs.

More than anything—

“It’s somewhat irritating to have Hilde grab the glory for this one...” Sigrún snorted as she grabbed the bow on her horse’s saddle, nocked an arrow, and drew it back.

The distance was already quite substantial. The compound bows provided to the Múspell Unit had far greater range than the standard bows of Yggdrasil, but she was still at the very edge of its effective range.

“Father, lend me your strength!” Sigrún shouted and loosed her arrow.

She ought to have prayed to the Steel Clan’s patron goddess, Angrboða, but in her heart of hearts, she felt that her beloved father would be more likely to provide some blessing.

The arrow cut through the air, making a beeline to Fagrahvél’s chariot, as though being pulled toward it by some unseen force.

“Mrmph!”

Fagrahvél tensed up in shock but managed to shake it off and dodge away from the arrow’s path at the very last moment. If that reaction had been even marginally slower, the arrow would have been lodged squarely between the eyes—a most-certainly lethal blow.

Of course, it would be asking too much for a single arrow to take down the enemy’s supreme commander. However, it seemed that the arrow yet still had a blessing to grant—

Neeeeigh!

—The sound of a horse’s high-pitched scream could be heard soon after.

Fagrahvél turned back in surprise and saw that one of the horses pulling the chariot was in a frenzy, ignoring the chariot driver’s commands. Embedded in its hindquarters... was Sigrún’s arrow.

The driver tried in a panic to tighten the reins and bring the horses back under control, but the chariot swerved back and forth, eventually crashing into a tree and coming to a stop. With the chariot now out of action, Fagrahvél was out of options.

“I, Lady Hildegard, have captured the Sword Clan patriarch, Fagrahvél!” A young woman’s joyful cry echoed into the heavens.



“Yes, yes! I’ve finally done it!” Hildegard was at the peak of happiness.

As a general rule, the women serving near Yuuto tended to be content with serving by him due to their almost fanatical love of him, but Hildegard had a strong sense of ambition.

She was driven by a desire to take a direct Oath of the Chalice from Yuuto himself and start her own clan, but that ambition had led her to try too hard and resulted in her making all kinds of mistakes.

Just as she had been wondering if her destiny was to fall short of that ambition, she came into a feat so remarkable—capturing the Alliance Army’s supreme commander. It would have been impossible for her not to be over the moon.

“Hey! Mother! I’m the one who captured Fagrahvél! Don’t try to take credit for it!”

“Of course not! Who do you think I am? You?” Sigrún quickly retorted.

“Then please tell the reginarch just how well I did! Don’t hold back a single detail!” Hildegard made sure to let her demands be known.

“Yes, all right, all right.” Sigrún frowned as though she were thoroughly displeased, making a shooing motion.

“Hey, why are you acting like it’s so bothersome?! Wait... Mother, are you jealous of me?!”

“...What? How did you come to that conclusion?!” The shock of such an accusation caught Sigrún momentarily off guard.

“Heheh, no need to hide it. I mean, I understand why you’d be jealous.”

“If anything I was rejoicing as though it were my own accomplishment...” Sigrún sighed and slumped her shoulders, shaking her head.

While she had quite an attitude, she was also studious and wasn’t afraid to make her opinions known to Sigrún. Those qualities meant Sigrún didn’t mind Hildegard.

If anything, Sigrún was starting to think of her like an actual blood sister. For

this reason, she was sincerely happy for the fact Hildegard had accomplished a major feat and could understand why she wanted to boast, but...

Frankly, she was a nuisance. It was just too much. Just far, far too much...

While Sigrún originally had no intention of doing such a thing, she was so annoyed that she even briefly considered just taking all the credit for herself.

“Heheh. So this means the age of Mother Sigrún is over, and the age of the great Hildegard is about to begin, right?”

Hildegard’s ego continued to inflate.

Sigrún couldn’t help but cringe at this thought and hurriedly sent a messenger to Yuuto.

And this was how, regardless of how it happened, news of the Sword Clan patriarch Fagrahvél’s capture spread like wildfire throughout the Steel Clan army’s ranks.

At around the same time...

“Big Sister Mitsuki! It appears that Father has defeated the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army! It was a definitive victory! They’re now engaging in a pursuit battle!”

“Oh! Thank goodness...”

Mitsuki let out a sigh of relief as Linnea joyfully barged into the room with a letter clutched in her hand.



It had been ten days since Yuuto had left the Steel Clan capital of Gimlé. Stress was something the pregnant Mitsuki needed to avoid, and given that she had spent every day worrying about Yuuto's safety since he had left, the news came as much-needed relief.

"Father really is amazing. To defeat the Alliance Army made up of five powerful clans..." Linnea said, thoroughly impressed.

"Uh-huh, sure seems that way." Mitsuki nodded along, as though she were humoring her.

The image of Yuuto among the Steel Clan was that of an avatar of a war god who defeated all challengers, and also a ruler of unrivaled greatness who had brought wealth and prosperity to his people through his policies. This concept was something Mitsuki still struggled to wrap her mind around.

Having known him from childhood, in her eyes, the young man named Suoh Yuuto was still predominantly a normal boy in his teens with a bit of a mischievous streak.

"Yuu-kun wasn't hurt, right?" Mitsuki asked with worry in her voice.

"The letter doesn't mention anything of the sort. No doubt if he'd suffered any serious injuries it would've been mentioned, so I'm sure he's doing just fine," Linnea said as she served up the good news.

"That really is for the best, yup."

While she nodded in agreement, Mitsuki couldn't quite settle her nerves.

It was true that carrier pigeons were by far the fastest method of communication in Yggdrasil, but for Mitsuki who had been born and raised in the 21st century, it still felt torturously slow. She wanted to call him and hear his voice in real time to know he was all right. War, after all, was a place where one never knew what could happen and when.

"At any rate, I've sent carrier pigeons to inform Brother Ská of the Panther Clan, and Sister Lágastaf of the Wheat Clan. No doubt the news will be a great boost to their morale."

Linnea finally felt as if she could breathe again.

As the Second-in-Command of the Steel Clan, she essentially served as the clan's chancellor, overseeing the internal, military, and foreign affairs of the clan. The fact that she had been aware of the current situation and that she was tasked with dealing with it must have been an enormous burden on her shoulders. The long sigh of relief that she let out belied just how stressed she had been.

At any rate, as Linnea predicted, news of the great victory at the Battle of Vígríðr would serve as an enormous morale boost for the Steel Clan soldiers fighting around their territories.

“Father! Mjǫsa is under attack!”

“Tch, so they went that way.” Skáviðr furrowed his brow and made clear his frustration.

He was a man of perhaps around thirty with pallid skin and sunken cheeks. Yet in spite of his pallor, his eyes were as sharp as a hawk's, giving him a somewhat uncanny mien.

He had once served as Yuuto's enforcer as an Assistant Second of the Wolf Clan, but in honor of his contributions, he had been made patriarch of the Panther Clan, which ruled northwestern Álfheimr and now commanded them from the front lines.

“Appearing out of nowhere. Irritating.” Skáviðr's tone contained a substantial amount of irritation.

Given his reputation for consistently being calm and collected, it was rare to see him put voice to his frustration. Seen from another perspective, it meant that the situation he was dealing with was just that trying.

The Panther Clan was originally a nomadic clan that made its home in western Miðgarðr, but Skáviðr, an outsider, had essentially forced out the previous patriarch, Hveðrungr, and had taken over as its patriarch.

As such, there were a fair number who regarded him as a usurper and hoisted up a patriarch of their choosing, claiming to be the rightful rulers of the clan. The þjóðann's subjugation order had provided them with the perfect

opportunity to attack.

“Now, what to do...” Skáviðr stared off into space, as though he were at a loss.

The truth was that he was struggling with the lack of viable options available to him. The simple fact was that the Panther Clan’s territory was large. Too large. This was his main problem.

It hadn’t even been six months since Skáviðr had taken over as patriarch. He had yet to gain the loyalty of the clan’s people, and the enemy had plenty of justification provided by the Þjóðann’s order.

The clan’s more influential members were mostly watching from the sidelines, meaning that Skáviðr didn’t exactly have a large number of soldiers at his disposal. There simply weren’t enough men to defend the borders of his territory.

Troops sent to deal with raids would inevitably find the enemy gone, with the towns and villages already thoroughly pillaged and destroyed. A ruler that can’t defend his territory, of course, loses the trust of their people.

Further to that, the numerous skirmishes that had ended with no appreciable results had thoroughly sapped his troops of their morale and tired them both physically and mentally. He was currently stuck in a vicious cycle from which he couldn’t escape.

“Father, a message from Gimlé!”

“Mm?”

Skáviðr turned to face the messenger delivering the report, and there he saw a young man covered in sweat and grime running toward him. He knew from the messenger’s appearance that he had been in quite a hurry.

“Ah... As to be expected from a man like Father.”

Having taken the letter and read through its contents, Skáviðr let out a sigh of admiration.

The report stated that Yuuto had defeated the Alliance Army’s thirty thousand at Vígríðr. Not only that, but he had done it with a far smaller army—

one numbering just over ten thousand.

It had only been ten days since he had left Gimlé.

“Thanks to him, I see a way out of this.” Skáviðr’s lips bent themselves into a faint smile as he suddenly saw a path forward open in front of him.

If he were to make this news public, those that had been wavering in their support would quickly fall in line, and the Panther Clan remnants would soon struggle due to their backing suddenly vanishing.

“Well then, let us take care of these remnants. If I can’t manage that much after having had all of this done in my favor, there’s no way I would be able to face him.”

“The reginarch made adapting to the enemy’s movements so easy.”

The Horn Clan Assistant Second, Haugspori, sighed with a sour look on his face.

He had been placed in command of the Horn Clan’s army in Linnea’s stead, as she was commanding the Steel Clan’s logistical efforts in Gimlé. His forces had been sent to provide aid to the Wheat Clan, one of the Steel Clan’s affiliated clans, but frankly, he was struggling with that assignment.

The reason was because the recently-adapted phalanx wasn’t functioning well.

“There’s quite the difference between watching and executing, I suppose,” Haugspori stated, somewhat exasperated.

The Horn Clan had been the second clan after the Claw Clan to pledge themselves to Yuuto’s command, and had been fighting under him for a long time now.

The phalanx was one of the tactical formations that formed the cornerstone of Yuuto’s war strategies and saw frequent use. It had seemed like an easy enough formation to adapt, but this had been more difficult than expected.

Phalanxes were certainly difficult to break from the front, and because of their remarkable contributions in battle, it was easy to focus on their strengths,

but they also had a large number of weaknesses.

The greatest of these was the formation's utter lack of mobility.

Yuuto had covered for that weakness by making use of long-range crossbow and cavalry such as the Múspell unit. But it was perhaps too much to ask of even a skilled general like Haugspori to fully grasp and understand the strengths and weaknesses of tactics that were centuries ahead of their time.

As a result, over the course of multiple engagements, he had been unable to make an effective attack and was missing various vital battle-ending opportunities, and as a result, he had ended up surrounded by the enemy.

"So, what to do..." Haugspori gazed up at the sky, as though at a loss.

Being surrounded by the enemy was an extremely dangerous situation.

"Can't expect much from the Wheat Clan."

He furrowed his brow and let out a grunt of frustration.

The Wheat Clan's soldiers had shut the gates of the clan's capital and holed up within its walls. He had already sent several requests for them to deploy their troops but had been rebuffed at each turn.

While the Horn Clan was superior to the Wheat Clan within the Steel Clan hierarchy, that was really only applicable if any such orders came directly from the clan patriarch, Linnea. It was a bit harder for them to simply agree to do what an Assistant Second like Haugspori commanded.

It was perhaps a result of using diplomacy to avoid war over the years. They were simply not used to fighting.

Haugspori felt that, frankly, if they had moved in tandem with the Horn Clan's forces, they wouldn't be in the situation they were in now, but that was all hypothetical at this point.

It was unlikely they'd come out and risk their safety at this stage.

"Suppose we have no choice but to try a charge."

With the slower ranks of the phalanxes, they'd likely take a large number of losses until they could escape the encirclement, but he couldn't think of any

other solution.

He cursed his own lack of talent. But if he were to sit here twiddling his thumbs, he could very well lose the three thousand veterans Linnea had entrusted to his care. That was something he wanted to avoid at all costs.

“All right! Angrboða, lend us your blessing! All units...”

Rabble rabble rabble...

Just as Haugspori had steeled himself to give the order for a desperate charge, a murmur shot through the enemy army's ranks.

The people of Yggdrasil generally have keen eyesight, and Haugspori, as an expert archer, had eyesight that was far above the norm. Even within the dusk-lit gloom, he could see it clearly...

The expression of panic and fear upon the enemy soldiers' faces.

“Sieg Reginarch! Sieg lárn!”

“We have nothing to fear from the þjóðann!”

“Now is the time to strike back!”

And then from the distance, though faint, came the cheers of their own forces.

Haugspori came to a realization based upon those two observations.

It would seem that, far to the east of here, the reginarch had defeated the main forces of the Alliance Army. As a result, the reports of that victory had practically blown away the fear that had gripped the Wheat Clan's soldiers.

The situation turned quickly. The Hoof Clan's army scattered as it fled.

The Steel Clan Encirclement that had formed under the þjóðann's subjugation order had completely collapsed.

“Mm? Mmrrmph... Where... am I...?”

Erna woke from her slumber in a dimly lit room.

Erna was a member of the Maidens of the Waves, a group of nine elite

Einherjar who served under the Sword Clan, one of Ásgarðr's great clans. She wielded her immense lower body strength to move as swift as lightning across the battlefield, and many considered her the strongest of the Maidens of the Waves.

"Tch... So it wasn't a bad dream after all."

She attempted to sit up, only to remember she was restrained.

In the recent battle, eight of the Maidens of the Waves had staked everything on a desperate charge at the enemy, only to be disabled by mysterious smoke. They ended up in the hands of the enemy soon after.

She couldn't help but engage in a bit of self-hatred as she recalled how she had failed her beloved parent, Fagrahvél.

"I see you're awake."

A familiar voice addressed her from behind.

"Big Sister Thír?"

The voice belonged to another member of the Maidens of the Waves—their leader, Thír.

With her vaunted legs and both arms heavily restrained with thick, coarse rope, she struggled to move, but she somehow managed to turn her body. When she took a proper look, she came face to face not just with Thír, but...

"You're all here?!"

Every member of the Maidens of the Waves, save Bára, had their arms and legs tied together like Erna and lay there in the room.

The fact that the acclaimed warriors—who were the pride and joy of the Sword Clan and were famed across the breadth of Yggdrasil—were all captives here hit Erna's already-shaken psyche rather hard.

"Rest easy. While some haven't yet awakened, there is still life in them."

"Oh! Thank the gods..." Given that she had half-expected to never see them again, a sigh of relief spilled from Erna's lips.

Thír couldn't help but let out a faintly self-deprecating snort at Erna's relief,

however.

“Well. For now, at least.”

“...Yes, you’re right.”

Her relief was blasted away in an instant, and Erna, too, replied with a hardened voice.

No doubt morale would be heavily strengthened by a public execution of the Maidens who made up the Sword Clan’s leadership and, by extension, the Alliance Army’s too. If anything, that was probably the best possible outcome for them. They, the Maidens of the Waves, were all regarded as beautiful.

Meaning—

“Sniff... So we’re probably going to end up being playthings for the Steel Clan, aren’t we?” the youngest, Hrönn, said shakily, her eyes filled with tears.

In Yggdrasil, it wasn’t particularly uncommon for captured women to end up as comfort women. If anything, it was considered a reward for soldiers given all they had put on the line. Her fear was only natural.

“No, rest assured. That won’t happen,” Thír stated calmly.

Erna agreed with that particular observation.

The two of them had previously accompanied the þjóðann Sigrdrífa as bodyguards during her stay in lárnvíðr. Of course, they hadn’t been idle during their stay, instead using it to study the host country as much as possible.

Suoh-Yuuto prohibited those under his command from indulging in such actions. Indeed, offenders were punished severely. Many had been executed for those crimes, and it was accepted wisdom among the soldiers that the risk simply wasn’t worth it.

The Maidens of the Waves were, indeed, all beautiful, but despite the myriad of opportunities to indulge after their capture, it didn’t appear that any of them had been harmed.

At the very least they could trust that Suoh-Yuuto took a dim view of such things.

“Of course, we don’t know if the reginarch himself obeys such rules.” Thír snorted derisively.

It was well known that Suoh-Yuuto surrounded himself with beauties. The heavy punishments for those who abused women made sense if he were doing it to ensure other men didn’t lay claim to women that he wanted.

“If that’s the case, then there’s nothing to do but end our own lives before they can do anything,” Erna said simply, disgust evident in her tone.

To serve in a sworn enemy’s bed chambers was humiliation of the worst sort. If such a thing were to happen, the honor of the Maidens of the Waves, never mind herself, would be thoroughly debased.

It would be better to die than to expose oneself to that sort of fate.

“Patience, Erna. As I’ve told the others, you mustn’t die yet. Suffer through the humiliations as you must and wait for your opportunity.”

“Opportunity...?”

“That’s right.” Thír nodded faintly, her gaze fearless, as though she’d sworn a remarkable oath to herself.

At that, Erna, too, understood what Thír was trying to convey.

It’s true that leaving oneself to the mercy of the enemy was in many ways a fate worse than death. But in such situations, even the reginarch would be defenseless, and these tight bonds would likely be loosened.

Meaning there could very well be an opportunity to tear out his throat with their teeth.

As a result of them employing everything at their disposal and subsequently losing the main source of their military power—the Maidens of the Waves—the Sword Clan no longer had the strength to resist the Steel Clan.

However, the Steel Clan was young—less than six months old—and was formed around Suoh-Yuuto. If the great reginarch that held them together were to suddenly leave the stage, they would surely fall into disarray.

The Sword Clan still had Fagrahvél and Bára. They would surely rebuild the clan and turn the tide against the Steel Clan.

“...I understand. I, too, will do what I can do.” Erna swallowed as though steeling herself and nodded.

Of course, the only thing that awaited her if she were to slay the reginarch would be death, but she would happily accept that if it were for the Sword Clan and, more importantly, for Fagrahvél.

“Hey, you lot. The reginarch’s waiting.”

Suddenly a rough voice broke in, and soldiers lumbered into the room.

It seemed that their opportunity had arrived.

“Don’t get any ideas now.” With that, the soldiers began removing the binds on the Maidens’ legs. It would seem that they had determined it would be bothersome to carry them.

Eventually, the ropes on Erna’s legs were removed and she gained some semblance of freedom.

“Now, stand up!”

Though irritated at the arrogance of the soldiers barking their orders, Erna obeyed in silence.

The ásmegin from Erna’s rune was focused solely in her legs, meaning she could easily kick this irritating man to death, but killing a lowly jailer would do the Steel Clan no harm.

And being tied to the other Maidens of the Waves, she couldn’t escape. This was, by all accounts, a time for patience.

“Come with me!” The jailer pulled upon the rope and forced Erna and company to follow.

Erna bit her lower lip at the mocking looks directed at them by passersby. It felt as though they were criminals or some sort of carnival act.

Erna and the others had always been regarded with envy and longing within the Sword Clan palace. There was no other way to describe their current situation but as humiliating. Biting down on their lips in frustration and anger, they kept walking one step at a time, keeping in mind Thír’s words to them from earlier.

“We’ve arrived.”

They were brought to a large hall that could easily fit several scores of people. Finally they would face the reginarch, Erna thought and steeled herself once more.

It was true that Erna and the others had been beaten. But their spirit hadn’t been broken. If given an opportunity they would tear out his throat with their teeth. With that resolve in their hearts, they glared at the man in front of them.

“Ah, so you are the Maidens of the Waves.”

The moment the young man’s gaze fell upon her, Erna suddenly found it hard to breathe. She couldn’t stop the sweat from beading on her forehead. She wasn’t the only one. The other Maidens seemed similarly affected.

Is this really... The Steel Clan reginarch Suoh-Yuuto?! He’s like a completely different man now!

Erna swallowed hard.



While he was a bit taller than when she last saw him, his face and voice were familiar. He had a completely different air about him, however. The aura he gave off was cold, sharp, and oppressive.

“You were... the nine elite Einherjar that served under the Sword Clan’s patriarch, Fagrahvél, if I recall. Your reputations are well deserved. You fought as valiantly as the tales suggest. But you chose the wrong parent to exchange Chalice with.”

“Tch! No matter what you do to us, we’ll never regret our choice of parent!” At the reginarch’s dismissive snort, Erna couldn’t help but bark out in response.

The words had barely left her mouth before she remembered Thír’s words and realized her error. To get the opportunity she wanted, she needed to curry the enemy’s favor.

But while she had been prepared to deal with any insults and attacks upon herself, she couldn’t stay quiet when it was her beloved and respected parent that was being insulted.

Erna worriedly glanced at the reginarch’s face, but there was no sign of displeasure on his visage. If anything his lips were quirked in a smile that seemed impressed.

“Huh, it would seem you’re quite beloved, would it not?”

She felt her heart skip a beat. Golden hair rippled from the subject of the reginarch’s gaze. The handsome features were also quite familiar. It was the master of the Maidens of the Waves, Fagrahvél—

—or rather, it was their body double.

Body doubles...

Danger was an ever-present companion for those in power. As such it was a common practice in every era and on every continent for rulers to prepare a double who resembled them in appearance and dress.

Yggdrasil had no photographs, and until recently, no paper. While the name of the Sword Clan’s patriarch Fagrahvél was known throughout Yggdrasil, few members of other clans had ever met them face to face. Fagrahvél in particular,

given the nature of her rune, was often in situations where she couldn't so much as move.

Because of her virtuous personality, she had resisted the call to put up a body double, but had relented when the Maidens of the Waves had, together, prepared one for her.

"M-My lord?!" Erna cried out, doing her best to feign surprise.

The fact that the body double was currently here meant that there was a high probability that the real Fagrahvél was still at large.

Just by making the enemy believe the body double was the real Fagrahvél, she would increase her master's chances of successfully escaping. She had to do everything in her power to make the deception stick.

"Felicia, this one's a fake, as expected."

"?!" At the reginarch's casual dismissal, Erna felt something heavy grip her heart.

How did he know? She thought back to her own actions, trying to see where she'd tipped him off. She couldn't think of anything.

"Wh-Whaaat?! A fake?! Wh-What do you mean?!" a girl with pigtails said, looking stunned and confused.

The reginarch directed his gaze briefly to the body double.

"When they saw his face, several of them let out a small sigh of relief. When I called him a fake, several of them tensed. If he was the real Fagrahvél, they wouldn't have reacted this way."

"Tch!"

They got us! Erna grit her teeth in frustration.

He had bluffed them. She couldn't hide her irritation, not only at the reginarch for his trickery, but also at herself for falling into such a straightforward trap.

"Rún! Hveðrungr! Resume your pursuit!" The reginarch stood and raised his voice.

He was, after all, the man who had transformed the tiny, dying Wolf Clan into Yggdrasil's largest clan. He was quick to respond to unexpected developments.

"Aye! As you command!"

"Understood."

At the reginarch's order, a silver-haired girl and a masked man hurriedly left the room.

Erna knew their faces as well. She couldn't very well forget. They were both valiant warriors who made her blood run cold—commanders of the cavalry units that had so thoroughly harried the Alliance Army with the sheer speed of their attack. She could easily imagine how intense their pursuit would be.

"That was impressive, Big Brother. Though... it seemed you were suspicious from the very start. How did you know?" After the two commanders departed the room, a blonde beauty asked the reginarch thus, with a puzzled look plastered across her face.

"Mm? Simple. Look at him. He doesn't look the part of a patriarch of a great clan."

The reginarch made it sound so simple, but Erna couldn't help but marvel at his ability to judge people. That was true of the earlier exchange as well. He honed in on the slightest expression or movement, reading his opponents and seeing right into their souls to reveal the deception.

Just what sort of experiences did one have to go through to have that sort of eye at his age?!

So this is the Black One.

Erna shuddered once again at his measureless ability.

My lady, please be safe!

The only thing left for Erna to do was to pray for the safety of her master.

Pant... Pant...

In the morning haze, Bára clutched Fagrahvél to her chest and spurred her

horse onward.

It had been two whole days of non-stop riding. Even for an Einherjar, it was pushing at the limits of her endurance. Her face was clouded by fatigue—heavy bags were present under her eyes and were rather pronounced, at that.

“Seeeems there’s no one pursuuuuing. It was a bit of a gaaaamble, but it would seem that ditching the chariot was the right caaaall.”

Bára glanced backward and let out a breath, wiping the sweat from her brow. It was plainly obvious that a chariot wouldn’t be able to outrun a pursuit from a cavalry unit. For this very reason, she had placed a decoy upon the chariot and sent them off in a different direction, while she had—like the enemy—ridden directly on her horse.

It was a decision she’d come to in the heat of the moment.

Still, Bára wasn’t so reckless that she’d take risks without good reason.

“Guh!”

Her consciousness wavered for a moment as her fatigue threatened to overwhelm her. She swayed but quickly reinforced herself against her stirrups and somehow managed to right herself.

She had taken them from the Independent Cavalry Regiment they’d fought earlier. They were unfamiliar, so she had just been trying them, but their presence made an enormous difference when riding on horseback. She could understand how they would make combat on horseback easier.

“Even this one bit of riding equipment was faaaar beyond my imagining. Fraaaankly, I underestimated the enemy.”

She hadn’t been meaning to underestimate them. If anything she had thought she’d overrated them, even considering their accomplishments, but once they had actually clashed, she’d found that she hadn’t done nearly enough preparation. As a strategist, it was an unforgivable failure.

“Thiiiiis last defeat was all on meee. Buuuut... the Sword Clan... No, Fagrahvél, is nooot a person whose life can end in a place like thiiiiis.”

Bára fervently believed that Fagrahvél was a gift sent down from the heavens

to restore the Empire's fallen glory.

Fagrahvél's rune, Gjallarhorn, was the "Conqueror's Rune" used by the very first þjóðann to unite all of Yggdrasil.

Fagrahvél herself was a virtuous woman of noble character, with a close connection to the þjóðann. Bára couldn't regard all of that as mere coincidence. And even now, that faith hadn't wavered.

"Heheh, seems the gods haven't abandoned us yet, after aaaall."

As she caught a glimpse of something far in the distance, her convictions were, if anything, strengthened. This great defeat had merely been a trial that the gods had prepared for Fagrahvél to overcome and grow. They had just successfully overcome that particular trial.

Looming ahead was Dauwe Castle...

A fortress that had once been considered impregnable.



ACT 3

Two days had passed since Bára and Fagrahvél had arrived at Dauwe Castle.

The day after their arrival, Bára had been so exhausted that she had slept like a rock through the entire day.

It was a day later when the surviving members of the Alliance Army that had escaped the Steel Clan's pursuit began to gather at Dauwe.

"Weeell, your reputation for godly speed is well deserrrrved, Sir Hermóðr."

Bára welcomed in the newly arrived members of the Spear Clan army with praise.

Despite the intense pursuit by the forces of the Steel Clan, the Spear Clan had managed to get over five thousand of its soldiers back to Dauwe Castle.

While Bára's Sword Clan and the Spear Clan were potential enemies within the empire, given their current predicament, it was a reassuring sight.

"It's not only my doing. Father's guidance was invaluable. But pay that no mind, just how many soldiers do we have here?"

Hermóðr, the one responsible for that feat, didn't seem particularly impressed, and responded with a question of his own, his features stony.

Bára didn't mind his brusque manner. There was a certain warrior-like efficiency to it. She didn't particularly like the fact that he credited his success to the man Bára hated most in the world, though.

After a brief pause, Bára answered truthfully.

"...Cooounting your forces, we maaay or maaay not reach ten thousand totaaaal."

She had come to the conclusion that any bluffing here would do more harm than good.

"Ah, is that it? Heh..." Hermóðr snorted with a note of self-deprecation.

No doubt he had compared the current state of the army when they had first come to Dauwe Castle. They had started with over thirty thousand, but now they were down to less than a third of that number.

All glory in the world was fleeting, but facing that reality headlong, the only thing he could manage was a dry laugh.

“In terrrms of numbers we’re roughly equal to the Steel Claaaan, sooo if we focus on defending, we would have a chaaance against them, if they were a normal opponeeent.” Bára then shrugged her shoulders.

Yes, ordinarily, if they holed up behind the castle walls, they could hold out against a force of five or even ten times their size. They could laugh aside the threat posed by an army of the same size.

“Yes, you’re right. Frankly, against the ‘Black One,’ I’d have to say the odds are against us.”

Hermóðr was quite blunt in his response. He agreed that things weren’t looking too good.

“Aaas I thought.”

“From what Father tells me, the Steel Clan has ridiculous weapons capable of hurtling boulders long distances. Boulders so large that it would take several large men to move them. Dauwe’s defenses would be meaningless against such weapons.”

“Waaaait, they have whaaaat?!”

Even with that description, she couldn’t possibly imagine what they would look like. Just how could they manage such a thing? Even marshaling all of her knowledge and intelligence, not a single hint stood out to Bára. She once again felt the weight of just how absurd their opponent was.

“Well, we do have some time. Evidently they’re quite large and take several days to prepare.”

“I seeeee. So we need to come up with a soluuuution by that point, yesss?”

She’d been foiled by Hermóðr’s father’s—Hárbarth’s—information gathering ability countless times in the past, but just this once, she was thankful for it.

While the knowledge increased her sense of foreboding, it also made it possible to come up with countermeasures.

“Still, what shaaall we do...”

Bára sighed, likely nearing her wit’s end.

It was true that the current army gathered at Dauwe Castle was roughly equal to the Steel Clan in size, and by the next day, they could very well have more. But against the powerful troops of the Steel Clan, parity in numbers wouldn’t be enough.

Worse, the enemy had the momentum, having won a spectacular victory in their last battle, while the force currently residing within Dauwe Castle was little more than a collection of survivors from a defeated army. The gap in morale was enormous.

And Fagrahvél, who had the power to overcome that difference with her rune Gjallarhorn, had yet to even regain consciousness.

The answer Bára had reached given her predicament was...

The next day.

The Steel Clan army had started to gather in front of Dauwe Castle. Bára estimated that they had a bit under twenty thousand soldiers.

Even accounting for the fact that they had added the forces that had been defending the Ash Clan capital Vígríðr, it was a far larger army than the one they’d faced before. That must mean they’d also incorporated the Alliance Army soldiers they captured in their pursuit of the retreating forces.

While she would have gladly screamed curses at those who switched sides to save their own hides, Bára was also well aware that people were predisposed to jump on the winning side’s bandwagon.

“Weeell now, this is eeeeven worse than expected.”

There were only about a thousand soldiers left at Dauwe Castle. The rest had already escaped. Of course, her beloved master Fagrahvél was among the escapees.

“Hehe, still, it’s a perrrrrfect place for a valiant last staand. A once in a lifetime opporrrrtunity. Time to go out in a blaaaze of glooory.”

Bára smiled, as though she were relishing the moment.

Her expression had the ferocity of one who had thoroughly prepared themselves for death.

“It really is impressive to look at in the flesh.”

Yuuto let out a sigh of admiration at the walls of Dauwe Castle looming above.

Dauwe Castle was originally built to deal with incursions from the east, meaning that the westward side Yuuto was facing was, comparatively, rather simply constructed. It was still an impressive piece of architecture nonetheless.

“Bringing this down by normal means would be quite the headache.”

“Then shall I arrange for the trebuchets to be brought here as quickly as possible?” Felicia asked with a knowing look.

Trebuchets were siege weapons that Yuuto had brought knowledge of from the future—they were roughly three thousand years more advanced than Yggdrasil’s existing siege weaponry.

However tough the supposedly-impregnable Dauwe Castle may be, it was still a product of its time; a wall constructed of mud brick. Trebuchets would allow it to be destroyed with ease. However, Yuuto shook his head from side to side.

“We’ll start assembling them, but if possible, I’d prefer not to use them here.”

“Why is that?” Felicia asked, looking somewhat confused.

“According to our scouts’ reports, there were nearly ten thousand soldiers here. There’s no sign of their presence whatsoever, though.”

“That is certainly true, Big Brother.”

Felicia turned to look at Dauwe Castle as though confirming his observation and nodded.

If there were ten thousand soldiers in the castle, there should be murmurs

and other noises coming from inside with the arrival of an enemy army. It certainly didn't seem like they were staying quiet to draw the Steel Clan off guard either.

The Alliance Army was a makeshift army made up of several clans. Further, they had just suffered a massive defeat. Their chain of command had to be in disarray. It was difficult to imagine that they could manage that level of discipline among their ranks right now.

Which meant—

“This castle is probably mostly empty, save for a token force to cover the retreat. Meaning, Fagrahvél is probably already gone as well,” Yuuto observed with a bored snort, resting his chin in his hand.

His honest appraisal was that they were in a bit of a bothersome situation.

“If we spend our time messing around with trebuchets, they'll probably get away. I wanted to capture at least Fagrahvél before that happened.”

Even as they spoke, Fagrahvél was moving further away from them—toward the Sword Clan's territory. He would have liked to have gone after her as quickly as possible, but no matter how thinly guarded it may be, they couldn't move forward without dealing with this fortification first.

It was irritating, and his restlessness mounted.

“My apologies, Father. This is all due to my failure...” Sigrún, looking thoroughly dispirited and glancing to the ground, apologized.

“Huh? No, I wasn't trying to blame you...”

“But! If I hadn't been fooled, this wouldn't have...” She frowned, still glaring at the ground with a look of great frustration painted across her face.

No doubt the fact that she had been fooled by Fagrahvél's body-double and therefore had let the real Fagrahvél slip through her grasp was still bothering her.

He couldn't very well say it to her face, and the observation would have been out of place, but Yuuto couldn't help but imagine a sulking dog with her tail drooping after she had done something wrong.

It was an image that was far from her usual poise, and he couldn't help but find her reaction adorable.

"It's not your fault. No one knew what Fagrahvél looked like," Yuuto said, then lightly patted Sigrún's head.

He meant the words sincerely, not simply as a balm to soothe her. It'd be quite a feat to tell the difference between a body-double and the real individual when one had never seen the person before. It seemed that she herself couldn't accept that fact, though...

"But, Father, you were able to tell with a glance! I felt there was something wrong myself, but I thought it was due to fatigue and..."

Her rune, Hati, the Devourer of the Moon, gifted the bearer with a sharp sense of intuition. She evidently couldn't forgive herself for ignoring that insight.

"You're only human, you'll make mistakes."

"I understand that. But to do so at such a vital juncture!"

It was certainly eating at her. Sigrún bit down on her lower lip in frustration.

The fact that she was always hard on herself was a virtue and was one of the things that had kept her continually motivated to improve, but it could also hold her back in situations like this one.

Not being able to do something didn't ordinarily upset her to this extent. It was because she failed at something she could do under any other circumstance that she felt this level of embarrassment.

"Sheesh." Yuuto couldn't help but let out a dry chuckle as he ruffled her hair.

It wasn't as though Yuuto didn't know the feeling. He himself felt that way when he lost Fárbauti, his predecessor as patriarch of the Wolf Clan. That feeling of not being able to forgive himself.

It was still hard for him to think back on the days where it felt like he was struggling at the bottom of a piercingly cold lakebed, stuck in the gloom, and not able to find a way out.

While probably not as bad as his own depression, he still didn't enjoy

watching one of his beloved daughters suffer like this. To be a parent was to want to do something for your child...

“That is why I’d like to deal with this castle by the end of the day. Any ideas, Brother?”

“You make it sound so easy.” Hveðrungr let out a snort of exasperation, twisting his head to glance up at the looming fortress wall.

Even Hveðrungr couldn’t help but feel a bit of vertigo at the height of the walls. They were some of the tallest walls he’d ever seen. To take down such a fortress in a single day seemed like an impossible task.

“If anything, that sort of feat is your specialty, isn’t it?”

With that Hveðrungr turned a cold eye to Yuuto.

Iron smelting. Training soldiers to fight on horseback. Throwing large boulders. All of these things were impossible in this world.

It had always been the knowledge of the young man in front of him that had made the impossible possible.

“Mm, well... We didn’t bring any trebuchets, we’re down to our last two tetsuhaus, and we’re running short on arrows. Everything’s turning up empty.”

As though to say he was out of options, Yuuto turned his palms up at the sky and shrugged his shoulders.

In a way, it was perfectly natural. The main Steel Clan army had just completed a rapid march from the old Lightning Clan territory of Gashina, all the way to the Ash Clan capital, Vígríðr, in just ten days. Right after doing so, they’d had a massive clash with an army whose forces numbered twice their own. It would have been odder if they were still well-supplied.

“In that sense, you’re better at making do with what you’ve got, right, Brother? You’ve beaten the Wagon Walls several times, and your advice was vital when we brought down Fort Gashina.”

“I appreciate your praise, but even Alpiófr can’t pull off tricks without adequate preparation.” Hveðrungr shrugged his shoulders and let out a dry

laugh.

Certainly, from an outside perspective, Hveðrungr had used unexpected tactics to catch the enemy off guard. But that was only when seen from the perspective of others. Hveðrungr himself had his own calculations and planning that had gone into each of those tricks. He wasn't some sort of magician, after all.

"Mm? Oh, I got it! Preparation! I might have something after all. Anyway, I need to get on it. Thanks, Big Brother." Evidently having thought of something, Yuuto enthusiastically wandered off.

"Oh! Big Brother! Wait for me!"

Felicia, who had been glaring daggers at Hveðrungr, hurriedly took off after him.

Hveðrungr found himself standing alone by the wall. He snorted as though in self-mockery and muttered, "Besides, you're the big brother now, aren't you?"

"It's finally past noon..."

Bára let out a sigh as she glanced up from a turret upon the ramparts. Time seemed to drag onward.

She had sent Fagrahvél out on a horse with the riding equipment she'd taken from the Steel Clan, but it was still carrying two riders. Meanwhile, the Steel Clan's cavalry all had mounts of their own and were well trained in riding on horseback. It was still possible for them to catch up.

"If I can juuust hold on for the rest of the daaay..." Bára muttered to herself, grasping a fistful of her tunic.

Ordinarily, that wouldn't be too difficult. Holing up inside a castle and holding out for a day was something even the worst general could manage.

But matters change when it's the 'Black One' leading the opposing army. She just couldn't shake the feeling that he would pull some completely unexpected trick and destroy all of her plans.

"L-Lady Bára! They're coming from the escape path..."

“Oh! They’ve taken the baiiit!” Bára grinned at the news.

Castles have, since time immemorial, had escape routes for high ranking individuals such as the lords to use for escape. Dauwe Castle was no exception, but Bára had made the decision to leave that route undefended.

“Theeeen, let’s proceed as we plaaaanned.”

They knew where the enemy would be coming from. And, as an escape route, it was cramped, with perhaps enough room to let in a single person. There was no better place for an ambush.

“Now if we can just get the silver wolf, we’d be in luuuuck.”

Even if the individual in question was reputed to be the greatest warrior in Yggdrasil, they’d be alone with their hands occupied climbing a ladder. They stood no chance against an ambush by a large group.

Oh! Here they come.

What appeared from the hole following loud footsteps was—

“Ah?!”

Once they’ve made their peace with death, people can withstand just about anything.

Whether it’d be the Mánagarmr or the masked black knight, or even if it turned out to be thunder bombs that spread sound and flame, no doubt they would have stood their ground and fought on with their spears.

But those soldiers all went pale—eyes wide in fright—forgetting what they were tasked to do as their bodies tensed in fear. They were completely caught off guard and couldn’t recover their wits.

“Graaaaaaahh!”

At the deep, rumbling snarl of a beast that rang to their very core, the soldiers flinched and drew back. There were even some whose legs gave out from under them.

Having been completely focused and steeled against facing a particular opponent, their hearts couldn’t withstand the fear of the unexpected.

“A G-G-Garmr?!”

Even Bára was caught completely by surprise.

Yes, standing there was the giant wolf that made its home in the three great mountain ranges known as the Roof of Yggdrasil.

“Ah?!”

Bára then caught sight of the objects that were tossed above the head of the Garmr and toward the soldiers.

They were thunder bombs.

In here, they’d be a serious problem. They’d tip the balance of the fight completely.

She felt everything slow down, and the thunder bombs arched slowly through the air...

Boom!

The familiar concussive burst assaulted her ears.

“Gaaah!”

“Ack!”

“Ahhh!”

Then came the screams of her soldiers.

There was a silver-haired warrioress sitting atop the Garmr. Her face, while splashed with the blood of her enemies, was so beautiful that even Bára was momentarily entranced.

“I am Sigrún, daughter of the reginarch Suoh-Yuuto of the Steel Clan. Face me if you’ve already made peace with your death!” Sigrún’s lips quirked upward as she charged in on the back of the giant wolf. She drew blood with each flash of her spear. The sight of her looked like something out of myth.

“Hey, Mother Rún! Don’t go hogging all the glory!”

“That’s right. You need to leave some enemies for us.”

“Gah!”

“Gurk!”

Others emerged from the escape route, joining Sigrún and cutting down the soldiers in their path.

One was a red-haired girl with pigtails, while the other was a bearded giant of a man who resembled a bear.

They certainly looked like opposites, but their movements and blows were sharp, showing that both of them were clearly skilled warriors.

“Argh!”

“Guh!”

“Ugh!”

Each time the three of them swung their weapons, a soldier screamed out in pain.

They were strong. Overwhelmingly strong. Each fought with a fury and strength that was as impressive as any of the Maidens of the Waves.

There were only three of them, but no one could stop them. Even as they overwhelmed their opponents, more enemy soldiers emerged from the escape path, reinforcing their number.

“...Theeey completely got us this tiime,” Bára said through clenched teeth as a single drop of sweat ran down her cheek.

She had let them into the castle and they’d now gotten a foothold. Even Bára couldn’t do much to stem the tide now. Instead of entrapping the enemy, they had caught her completely by surprise and taken the initiative.

“But come on, a Garmr is cheating, isn’t iiiit?!”

Just how was she supposed to foresee the use of a wild beast like that? There was no way to have prepared against it.

That one moment of surprise created a lethal opening for her enemy.

“Grr, then at the very least, I’ll take the Silver Wolf with meee!” Bára took up her spear and leapt at Sigrún. If she could take her down, the Steel Clan’s morale would suffer.

Further, she was the commander of the cavalry unit. If they lost her, the unit would lose cohesion and the pursuit might falter. The blow had such hopes riding on it, but...

“Not enough!”

It was easily brushed aside by Sigrún’s blow.

“What?!”

Bára stared as her spearpoint was lopped off as though it were made of cheese. She knew that the Steel Clan, as its name implied, made use of steel. But still, this level of cutting ability was ludicrous.

“The gold circlet. You’re one of the Maidens of the Waves, aren’t you?”

The silver-haired girl glared at Bára from atop the wolf, and the blade in her hand flashed like a bolt of silver lightning. With no time to even avoid the blow, Bára felt a jolt of pain surge through her shoulder.

Fagrahvé!... I pray you get to safety...!

As she lost consciousness, Bára clung to that one ray of hope.

“...Mm?”

At the sound of hoofbeats and the vibrations buffeting her body, Fagrahvé! slowly opened her eyes.

Her view was faintly dark, and there was a familiar-looking mountain range hazily off in the distance.

The Þrymheimr Mountains.

“Where... am I...?”

She wasn’t fully conscious and her head was still foggy. Her sluggish thoughts recalled that she had been fighting the Steel Clan army at the Vígríðr Plains.

Yes, she had used Gjallarhorn up to her very limit, and Bára, sensing that approaching limit, had sent a charge of the eight Maidens of the Waves into the enemy, which ultimately ended in failure—

And that was all she could remember.

“Oh, my lady, you’re awake!” A familiar voice came from behind.

It was a member of her personal guard.

It was then she finally realized that, like the Steel Clan soldiers, she was riding upon a horse with his support. There was simply too much that she didn’t understand.

“Keith, explain the situation to me.”

“Yes, m’lady. We, the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army, were defeated at the Battle of Vígríðr. We are currently retreating back toward Sword Clan territory.”

“What of Bára?”

There was no one else traveling alongside Fagrahvél. She could easily fill in the blanks herself.

But she still needed to ask...

“Big Sister Bára said she would hold the enemy at Dauwe Castle.”

“...I see.”

Fagrahvél closed her eyes as if slowly digesting the things Keith was telling her, and eventually sighed out the words.

She had known Bára for as long as she could remember. Since she had risen to the position of patriarch of the Sword Clan, Bára had supported her as a strategist. Bára would always be at her side. Fagrahvél had somehow convinced herself that would be true.

But now she was no longer here. She might never see her again. Fagrahvél felt a sharp pain in her chest, clutching her hand to steady the pang.

The enemy wasn’t about to give Fagrahvél the opportunity to wallow in her sorrow, however...

Thunderous hoofbeats approached from behind. A glance back showed an army of mounted soldiers kicking up dust as they quickly moved in on her current position.

Dauwe Castle must have already fallen, which meant that Bára, who had been defending the castle, had...

“Dammit! We’ve come too far to be caught here!”

Keith hurriedly whipped the horse to spur it onward. Try as he might to escape, there were two of them atop their horse. The distance between them and the pursuing cavalry continued to close.

“Dammit! Run! Run! Why won’t you run?!” Keith shouted in a particularly shrill voice, waving his whip around maniacally.

“Enough. What good will it be for just me to survive?” Fagrahvél quietly noted with a tone of resignation.

“My lady, you are the parent to us, the loyal subjects of the Sword Clan! All of us—all of our country—await your safe return!”

“I would only be bringing shame to us.”

The soldiers, of course, had their own families.

As patriarch, she had set out with the responsibility for their lives on her shoulders. She couldn’t imagine why she should be allowed to survive when so many had fallen under her orders.

Even then, if she could have protected Sigrdrífa, her beloved younger sister, then she would have borne any shame, any hardship.

But she had already lost most of her soldiers, and, starting with her strategist Bára, had also lost all of her skilled generals—the Maidens of the Waves.

That victory would likely bring even more impetus to the Steel Clan. Just how was she to fight them now?

It was unavoidable. Soon the Sword Clan would be absorbed by the Steel Clan. And then, so would the empire. No matter what she did, that fate was set. It was time to accept it.

“Keith, stop the horse.”

“B-But...”

“This is an order as your mother.”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

After a brief moment of hesitation, Keith reined in the horse, his expression

one of extreme regret. Shortly after, the cavalrymen surrounded them.

Looking upon the enemy, Fagrahvél addressed them, undaunted.

“I am Fagrahvél, patriarch of the Sword Clan and leader of the Alliance Army. Take me to your leader.”

Valaskjálfr Palace—

The residence of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire’s þjóðann, Sigrdrífa—standing in the middle of the holy capital of Glaðsheimr.

Or rather, that was all in name only, for the actual master of the palace was no longer her.

The one who actually wielded power in the empire was the High Priest and Spear Clan patriarch Hárbarth, something that was known by all of the court officials.

He currently sat in a chair in his own room, slumped against the chair back, face gazing at the floor.

If someone else had been present, they might very well have believed that his old age had caught up with him and he had just died. He had been like this for the better part of two hours, but he then suddenly twitched, his body waking.

“Hrmph. Dauwe has fallen, and Fagrahvél is in the hands of the enemy,” Hárbarth muttered without amusement.

From the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr, it would take at least ten days to reach Dauwe Castle by chariot. But somehow he knew what had happened within the day. That was part of his power as an Einherjar.

“Useless pawns, the lot of them.”

He let out an irate sigh.

With their patriarch, Fagrahvél, in the Steel Clan’s hands, it was best to consider the Sword Clan lost to the enemy. To have it happen so easily was unexpected.

Considering that there would be matters to deal with after the battles and the

upcoming winter, that gave him some breathing room, but at the earliest, they would likely attack around next spring.

“Not nearly enough soldiers or time until then.”

In the most recent engagement, the Spear Clan had lost approximately half of the soldiers it had sent. It was an enormous number of casualties.

Further, the other members of the Alliance Army had suffered similarly. The Fang Clan had lost its patriarch and collapsed, while the Cloud Clan’s patriarch had somehow gotten out with his life, but he had now withdrawn to the plains, unlikely to come south again. The Hoof Clan and the remnants of the Panther Clan had been defeated and retreated.

Despite attacking with all the surrounding clans, they had been thoroughly repelled. That fact was indisputable.

Even if he were to have the þjóðann issue another imperial decree, there was no doubt that not a single clan would move in response to it out of fear of the Steel Clan.

“Well then, what to do...”

ACT 4

“We are surrendering to the Steel Clan.”

“What?!”

The words sent a rippled murmur through the assembled courtiers.

They’d been suddenly summoned early in the morning, only to be greeted by this outrageous pronouncement from their master. They had every right to be perplexed.

“Wh-What is the reasoning behind this, Your Majesty?” The vizier, clearly in a state of much panic, asked the question on behalf of the assembled courtiers.

Each þjóðann was gifted with runes in each eye, a sign of their divine right to rule Yggdrasil. For the þjóðann to fall under the sway of another clan, putting aside any matters of material power, was something that could never be allowed from the standpoint of tradition and legitimacy.

However, the þjóðann in question seemed undisturbed as she sat upon the throne. She recrossed her legs and spoke once more.

“The Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army was defeated at Vígríðr.”

“Wha?! I-Is that true?”

“The report came from the high priest. There’s little chance of it being in error.”

Another murmur rippled through the courtiers at the þjóðann’s words.

That the Imperial High Priest—Hárbarth—maintained a formidable grasp on events within and without the empire was well known by all those present.

If it came from him, they reasoned, the information was reliable.

“Currently the Sword Clan’s patriarch, Fagrahvél, who had led the Alliance Army, has been captured, and the Fang Clan’s patriarch, Sígismund, was slain in battle. The rank and file have fled, though many have been captured.

Meanwhile, in Álfheimr, the Hoof Clan and the remnants of the Panther Clan have retreated...”

The þjóðann calmly counted off the events on her fingers. At each statement, the faces of the courtiers grew just that much paler. They were beginning to grasp that this was not a mere defeat. This was a catastrophic loss.

The þjóðann cast a brief glance at them, then declared, “The Alliance Army is finished. It is only a matter of time before the Steel Clan advances upon us here at the capital.”

“Nrr-Nrrgh. Wh-What has the high priest said on this matter?!”

“Were you not listening?” the þjóðann responded in a rather curt tone.

“N-No, I had only hoped to confirm it from him directly...”

“You doubt the words of your þjóðann?”

“N-No, of course not...”

Faced with an intimidating glare, the vizier shuddered and fell silent.

“He certainly chirps loudly for being as incompetent as he is,” Hárbarth muttered to himself from within the þjóðann’s body.

Even he can’t control two bodies at once.

He had been the one who had ingrained the preeminence of the High Priest over the þjóðann in the eyes of the courtiers, but he found the whole arrangement to be cumbersome in situations such as this one.

“Regardless, with the situation as it is, the high priest and I have determined that the only way for the empire to survive is to swiftly offer our surrender and beg their forgiveness.”

“...”

Complete silence enveloped the hall. It seemed as though they had finally wrapped their minds around the news.

Regardless of what else had happened, the empire had always maintained a symbolic authority, and all of them had been certain that this status quo would continue to be maintained. This news shattered that illusion, however. They

were all clearly at a loss as to how to proceed.

Not that it is of any concern to me.

Hárbarth easily came to the decision to abandon them. His thoughts were more occupied with the important business of what was to come. If the Steel Clan desired hegemony over Yggdrasil, no doubt they would want the legitimacy provided by the þjóðann.

In that case, he still had options. His earlier plans had collapsed, forcing him to thoroughly rework them. It was a bit disappointing that his own blood wouldn't inherit, but that brat brought enough to make up for that loss and more.

Heh, I'll be the one who laughs in the end.

The flames of Hárbarth's ambition had lost none of their strength and continued to burn brightly.

Brought to a great hall, Fagrahvél was forced to sit in a chair at its center. All four of her limbs were restrained, leaving her unable to move.

Arrayed in front of her was a group made up of fierce-looking individuals. They all had an air and aura that suggested they were each a considerable figure in their own right. Such was to be expected.

They were no doubt the ones who occupied the inner circle of the emergent Steel Clan, meaning they had all fought and attained their positions through sheer ability.

"Ah, so you're Fagrahvél."

"Ah!"

A shudder ran up her spine. He looked like a young man still in his teens. Rather on the delicate side for a man, he didn't look particularly strong. But she knew at a glance.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Suoh Yuuto, reginarch of the Steel Clan."

As she'd guessed. Fagrahvél could only swallow as she felt a lump in her

throat.

Fagrahvél's rune, Gjallarhorn, increased the fighting ability not of herself, but of the group around her. As such, to make the most of her power, she needed competent help, which was perhaps why she had always been good at sizing people up.

She could see that the young man in front of her was quite the monster. The air he gave off was simply incomparable. The generals around him were all high-ranking members of a great clan. Each must have had impressive resumes in their own right.

The wolf-like silver-haired young woman standing next to the reginarch, in particular, gave off an aura of a legendary warrior who had fought on countless battlefields despite her youth.

But all of them paled in comparison to him.

So this is the Black One.

She could very well understand why others believed that he had been sent by the gods or that he was a manifestation of the god of war.

"...Fagrahvél, patriarch of the Sword Clan."

Fagrahvél lowered her voice, speaking slowly to keep any tremors from her voice.

The general of a defeated army that had lost despite boasting nearly three times the forces. That was what Fagrahvél was now. It was a humiliating thing to be. That was why as patriarch of the Sword Clan, a distinguished clan dating back to the start of the empire, she could ill afford to further humiliate herself. That was all she sought to accomplish.

"Mm. I certainly didn't expect to find out you were a woman, and such a beautiful one at that."

At the reginarch's gaze, Fagrahvél bit down on her lower lip.

While she had portrayed herself as male for the sake of appearances, she was, in fact, a woman.

As a captive, she had been searched in the process of being disarmed. The

memory of that humiliation brought the anger bubbling back to the surface.

“Well, I suppose it isn’t that rare. You know, I thought Linnea was going to be one of those super muscular amazons until I met her.”

The reginarch began to chuckle, as though remembering something.

As he noted, while it wasn’t common to lie about one’s appearance or gender, it wasn’t unusual, either. While Yggdrasil, with its chalice system, was more meritocratic than most, given the time period, there was still a belief that women were the weaker sex. To put it bluntly, there were plenty of times when someone would look down upon you for being a woman.

That was why, after consulting with Bára, Fagrahvél had decided to leave behind the fact that she was a woman when she joined the Sword Clan. It was all for Þjóðann Sigrdrífa, which meant that, now, it might be appropriate to take back that guise for her sake.

“Reginarch of the Steel Clan, you described me as a beauty, did you not?!”

Steeling herself, Fagrahvél glared at the reginarch and raised her voice. She realized her mistake only after the words had left her mouth. She hadn’t shown any trace of seductiveness. This was the first time she’d even tried to use her looks as a weapon in her twenty-five years of life.

“Mm? Yes. I understand now why they called you the Lord of Beauty. Frankly, I’m surprised you were able to insist you were a man despite that beauty.”

“I see.”

Fagrahvél let out a small sigh of relief and nodded to herself. She had thought she’d failed with her first move, but she was able to confirm that she still appeared attractive to him in spite of that. In which case—

“Reginarch!”

As she called out, Fagrahvél stood up and straightened her posture, as though accentuating her ample bosom outward. She was, in fact, endowed with an extremely feminine body, with curves in all the right places.

While it was ordinarily hidden by armor, she had none of that on at present. If anything, the ropes binding her seemed to accentuate the curves. She wanted

to crouch down in embarrassment, but she bore it and desperately raised her voice.

“If you find this body to be your liking, then do as you wish, I shall obey without question.”

“...Oh? Anything, eh?”

For a moment, the reginarch widened his eyes in surprise, but then quickly quirked his lips up in a smile and addressed her. The Steel Clan reginarch’s reputation for womanizing was evidently well-earned.

She didn’t carry herself in a particularly feminine manner, but perhaps he was interested in trying a slightly different dish than usual?

“So, what is it you want in exchange?”

As the reginarch looked down at her with a testing gaze, Fagrahvél glared at him and raised her voice.

“I have two demands. First, guarantees for the lives of the Sword Clan’s subjects.”

“Mm.”

The reginarch sounded impressed and his gaze softened slightly.

There were rumors which described the Steel Clan’s reginarch as an arrogant dictator who forced through various reforms. Looking at his results, however, it was clear to see that he was a good ruler who substantially improved the lives of his subjects.

It seemed the fact that she was willing to put herself on the line for her people caught his fancy.

“Very well. That was already the plan to begin with. I have no objection.”

“Thank you.”

Fagrahvél thanked him sincerely and let out a sigh of relief. She didn’t want to cause problems for her people through her own failure. The real problem was the next request.

“And the other?”

“The responsibility for the subjugation order is mine to bear. The þjóðann is uninvolved. Please, I beg that you will guarantee Her Majesty’s safety...!”

Fagrahvél lowered her head so quickly that it seemed as if she’d slam her forehead against her knees.

She felt her body tremble. Her heartbeat quickened.

Despite the fact that her heart was beating so quickly, the space between each beat seemed to drag on.

When a few seconds—but several eternities for Fagrahvél—had passed...

“Raise your head.”

“Very well.”

At the reginarch’s order, Fagrahvél straightened.

“You’ll obey any order, is that right?”

The reginarch stared intently into Fagrahvél’s eyes and asked as if confirming. Looking into his bottomless black irises, she felt as though everything she thought was laid bare, but still there was no doubt in her mind. She balled both hands into fists and forced herself to speak.

“Yes! If you’ll accept my terms!”

“Very well. Then, to begin with, you’ll accept my chalice as a child.”

“Yes, that I’ll do happily. I will gladly accept your chalice.”

Her words were sincere, not mere flattery.

She didn’t know the reginarch’s personality whatsoever, and it wasn’t as though she was taking his chalice because she was enamored with his character, but a parent surely wouldn’t harm a child’s territories.

It hurt to admit, but the Sword Clan simply no longer had the power to resist the Steel Clan. If they could get away without punishment simply by joining their ranks, it would be impossible to find better terms. This would at least guarantee the Sword Clan’s safety.

“Good. As a child, you’ll fight when I tell you to fight?”

“Yes! Send me to fight whenever you please. I will go wherever the reginarch—wherever my father—wishes me to.”

“And you’ll serve in my bedchambers as well?”

“Yes. While I have little experience in that realm, I will commit myself to you heart and soul. I shall do whatever it is you ask of me.”

“I see. Well then...”

The reginarch smiled coldly, crossing his legs and offering out his foot.

“Then in lieu of the chalice. Lick my feet. Crawl over and do it.”

“...!”

Fagrahvél couldn’t help but find herself hesitating to respond. As the patriarch of the Sword Clan, she was known for her noble personality, and she herself had taken pride in that way of living. To make her crawl over and lick one’s foot was essentially treating her as little better than an animal. It was a humiliating order without equal.

“Very... well...”

With all that said, however, Fagrahvél uttered words of assent, bent down to her knees, and leaned forward.

Her face rapidly approached the shoe. She knew that something inside her would die the moment she licked that shoe, but she was willing to make that sacrifice.

She stuck out her tongue, and just as she was about to lick the shoe—

“That’s enough,” the reginarch said, and pulled his foot away from her mouth.

He then kneeled down and slightly raised Fagrahvél to face him.

“Unfortunately, a man in my position can’t afford to simply believe every former enemy that comes his way, which is why I tested your commitment and your dedication to Her Majesty. My apologies.”

“No, there is no problem. You can test me as much as you wish.”

“Allow me to ask. Why are you so loyal to Her Majesty? You may have been milk siblings, but you aren’t actually related, are you?”

The reginarch caught her gaze from up close.

His words may have still had an edge to them, but the reginarch's eyes no longer held the intimidating aura that they had earlier. If anything, Fagrahvél felt a certain amount of expectation from it.

"We aren't related, that is true, nor have we exchanged chalices. Though even in spite of all that, however presumptuous it is on my part, I hold her to be my younger sister."

"Younger sister, mm?"

"There's no why or wherefore. How could I abandon a young girl who was alone and crying?!" Fagrahvél glared and shouted at the reginarch.

After exchanging glares for a few moments, the reginarch smiled.

"I had no intention of harming Her Majesty."

"Ah! You mean those words?!"

"Yes, I know the subjugation order wasn't of her will. No, I owe her a debt I can never repay. I swear to you by the name of Suoh-Yuuto and my chalice as the Steel Clan."

"Oh, oh... Oh, thank the gods..."

Overcome with emotion, Fagrahvél let out a sob.

It was not a mere promise. He had sworn on his name and his chalice in front of his clan's leadership. If he were to go against that, he would lose the trust of his children.

Ordinarily there'd be no reason for him, the victorious general, to swear by such a thing to a defeated general. That he did so anyway meant there was no deception to his words, and that he truly wanted to save the þjóðann.

She felt a heavy weight lift from her shoulders. Tears began to stream down from both her eyes.

"Thank the gods... Thank the gods... Waaaaaaaah!"

Afterward, Fagrahvél could do nothing but cry like a child.

"To behave in such a manner, and in front of my future parent, no less... you

have my sincere apologies.”

Fagrahvél once again lowered herself to her knees and deeply bowed her head.

They had already moved rooms and were now in the castle lord’s chambers.

Fagrahvél then sat up, looked to the bed, and nodded to herself as though coming to some sort of understanding.

“So I should offer myself up here, yes? Um, how am I supposed to do this?” Fagrahvél asked, her expression completely serious.

With it clear that he had no intention of harming the þjóðann Sigrdrífa, Fagrahvél had no remaining hesitation about offering up her body. About the only thing that worried her was the ropes binding her arms and legs. Was it even possible with the restraints? But the answer she got was completely unexpected.

“Oh, no, no. No need for anything like that.”

Having taken a seat on the bed, the reginarch waved his hands dismissively showing he really had no interest in such matters. While she had long since stopped thinking of herself as a woman, the response still bothered her.

“I suppose I’m simply not worth claiming.”

“That’s not it! I’m not so desperate I’ll sleep with someone who doesn’t like me.”

With a dry laugh, the reginarch pulled the blonde beauty next to him into an embrace.

“Eep!”

She was a beauty that would have stood out even in the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr. Her body was also sensual in its proportions.

“B-Big Brother?!”



While there was a note of criticism in her tone, she made no effort to distance herself from him.

Rather, being pulled into the embrace provoked the opposite. Her cheeks were faintly flushed, and while her eyes had a faint look of embarrassment, they also shimmered expectantly.

It wasn't the expression of a woman drawn to power. Clearly, it was the expression of a woman in love with the man himself.

He had the affection of a woman that was almost divine in her beauty. Further, his main wife was supposedly back in the Steel Clan homeland. The silver-haired wolf also seemed quite taken with him.

"I see. As you say, you seem to have no shortage of women by your side."

"Yeah, I guess you could put it that way."

"Then perhaps you have something you wish to ask me concerning Her Majesty?"

"Yep. You're as sharp as I expected."

The reginarch's lips quirked into a boyish grin. The expression made him look his actual age, with a faintly child-like mischief lurking behind his smile. She had to admit she found it a little cute.

For just a moment, Fagrahvél felt her heart skip a beat.

"Mm, something wrong?"

"Huh? No, not at all."

Fagrahvél hurriedly shook her head from side to side. Her heartbeat was back to normal.

She had no idea what that was, and it was faintly worrying—but issues with her own health were the least of her worries at the moment.

"Then let me be blunt: Who used Her Majesty's name and issued the subjugation order against the Steel Clan?"

"A-As I said earlier, all responsibility for that order lies with me..."

“And as I said, I have no intention of harming Her Majesty. But, I see. So Her Majesty was the one who issued the order?”

He certainly deserved to be called perceptive. It was to be expected of a man who'd built up such a great clan in a little over two years. His mind worked quickly.

Given what he had already sensed, there was no point in hiding it any further, as it'd just damage his trust in her. Fagrahvél decided it was better to lay it all on the table here. There was nothing to be gained by earning his distrust.

“...It's true that Her Majesty issued the subjugation order. But... Her Majesty has been behaving oddly as of late.”

“Oh! Oddly, you say?! When did that start?!”

The reginarch pounced on that nugget of information. Though a tad intimidated by his eagerness, Fagrahvél continued.

“I believe it was early in the summer, a little after the wheat seeds had been planted. She had been ill, and after her recovery, it was almost as if she were someone else entirely.”

“As I thought...”

Something seemed to fall into place for the reginarch and he quickly sunk into thought. Based on what she had told him, it seemed as though he had some idea of what was going on. It concerned her precious little sister, so she couldn't help but ask...

“What... do you believe it to be?”

“Ahh, well, I'm not confident you'll believe me, but...” the reginarch said as a preface, glancing around for a moment as though unsure how to proceed.

“I'm not from Yggdrasil. I'm from a world about thirty-five hundred years in the future,” was what he wound up saying.

Ordinarily, such a statement would be greeted with laughter, but Fagrahvél knew that this young man was the legendary Black One. It would also explain why he had so many revolutionary tools and weapons.

“I see.”

As Fagrahvél nodded to herself, the reginarch let out a dry laugh.

“It feels a little weird when you’re so quick to believe me, but yes, that’s the long and short of it. It was in early spring. The Panther Clan’s Sigyn used a seiðr to send me back to my original time.”

“Ah, Sigyn, I see.”

Fagrahvél had heard that name before. She was certainly one of the greatest seiðr wielders in Yggdrasil—though her sister was much greater. She could very well imagine that someone as powerful as Sigyn could pull off oddities of that sort.

“Her Majesty was the one who was able to pull me back to Yggdrasil. If I had been stuck there, the Wolf Clan would have been wiped out and I would have lost my entire family, which is why I owe Her Majesty a debt I can never repay.”

“I hadn’t known...”

This was the first time she’d heard of it. Pulling a person from over three millennia in the future sounded like a remarkable seiðr.

“Ah?!”

Fagrahvél suddenly realized something.

She had seen a report from her spies that revealed that early in the spring, the Wolf Clan—the predecessor to the Steel Clan—was badly defeated by an alliance of the Lightning and Panther Clans, and for a month after, the patriarch, Suoh-Yuuto, was nowhere to be found.

That report had come in early in the summer.

Meaning—

“I see, so that’s why Her Majesty had collapsed.”

With all the pieces in place, Fagrahvél finally let out a soft sigh.

The þjóðann was incorrigible.

For the þjóðann herself to be the one to summon back the “Black One” prophesized by the oracle Völva to bring about the end of the empire, and then to end up confined to her bed for some time...

She even had some idea about why the þjóðann had acted as she had.

“Her Majesty was in love with you. A woman will do anything if she really does love a man.”

“Uh, ah, well, uh, I suppose so?”

The reginarch looked a bit troubled, but accepted that explanation.

Sigrdrífa had stayed at lárnvíðr from last winter until early spring. She had also read Erna’s report. Sigrdrífa had kissed the Wolf Clan’s patriarch.

As þjóðann she had been confined to the palace, and due to her physical weakness, she couldn’t spend much time outside of it.

But during that time, even if it had only been temporary, she was able to live and love like an ordinary girl. As her older sister, she found it to be a quite charming bit of news, something she was happy to hear.

She had been happy to hear it, but—

“So that’s why.”

“Mm?”

“Her Majesty began to resent you when you spurned her.”

“Whaaa?! Th-That doesn’t sound right!”

The reginarch’s eyes went wide, as though he was thoroughly caught off guard.

And here she had been thinking he was quite an impressive specimen. Fagrahvél couldn’t help but be a bit disappointed at his reaction. To deny it here wasn’t very manly.

“I’m still a woman, which is why I understand. After your marriage, her jealousy drove her to issue the subjugation order...”

It was the only thing she could think of. It made sense in terms of timing.

“W-Wait wait wait! I don’t think that’s it! My wife and Her Majesty are pretty close friends! I mean, they cooperated when bringing me back here.”

“Mm? Huh. Now that you mention it, that’s odd.”

Though delayed, Fagrahvél finally realized something.

“Her Majesty was at Valaskjálf Palace in the early summer. She was busy catching up on rituals that she had missed during the winter. There wouldn’t have been any time for her to sneak out of the palace.”

And yet somehow she had been working to summon back the Wolf Clan patriarch far away from there.

Even by carriage, it took about twenty days to travel from the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr to the Wolf Clan capital of Iárnviðr. The Wolf Clan patriarch had been missing for about a month; it wasn’t enough time for even a single exchange of letters. Something didn’t make sense here.

“Uhhh, well, my wife and the þjóðann Sigdrífa look exactly alike. The only difference is in their hair and eye color.”

“Now that you mention it, I recall hearing something along those lines.”

“It seems they share more than just appearance—there’s some sort of strange connection between them, and they evidently used to meet and talk within their dreams.”

“Dreams? That’s a difficult story to believe, but...”

“It’s the truth.”

“I see.”

It was a strange tale, but she had heard similar tales in the past.

“There are a pair of twins among my Maidens of the Waves, and they, too, have an odd connection. For example, if one was injured, the other would feel that pain even if she was uninjured. Perhaps there is a connection of that sort between Her Majesty and your wife, Father.”

“Yeah, I’m quite sure there is. I’d like you to keep this a secret, but there’s one more thing they share. My wife has the twin runes in her eyes.”

“Ah?!”

Fagrahvél couldn’t help but question her ears, and she stared intently at Yuuto’s face to confirm what he’d just said. His expression was thoroughly

serious, and he didn't appear to be lying, but it was still a difficult thing to believe.

A twin-runed Einherjar.

An ordinary Einherjar was said to occur once in every ten thousand people. To have two runes was an extraordinarily rare occurrence.

With the death of Steinþórr Dólgbrasir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger of the Lightning Clan, the þjóðann Sigrdrífa was now supposed to be the only one left. The existence of another with twin runes would have been a remarkable piece of news in and of itself, and yet...

She gulped loudly, then spoke to confirm...

"In her eyes?"

To look exactly like Sigrdrífa and to possess twin runes in her eyes would be something that went beyond mere coincidence.

"Yes, in her eyes."

The reginarch could evidently tell what she was trying to convey and nodded solemnly.

The people of Yggdrasil knew that the þjóðanns of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire had passed down the twin runes in their eyes from generation to generation.

To put it another way, to have twin runes in one's eyes was itself proof that one was the þjóðann.

"Let me make sure I'm clear on this: I don't have any intention of replacing the þjóðann with my wife."

"...Thank you for clarifying that."

Fagrahvél lightly bowed her head, thankful to have her concern addressed.

She did have one more thing to add, however...

"You understand that I can't quite simply take you at your word on this."

With an identical face—and more importantly—the twin runes of the þjóðann, it would be easy for her to take Sigrdrífa's place and claim the title of þjóðann. If the reginarch intended to become the conqueror of Yggdrasil, it

would be extremely attractive to be able to have the þjóðann as his wife and utilize her authority on his behalf.

Humans were ambitious animals. Those that climb to positions of authority even more so. She couldn't simply take his word—that he'd abandon that advantage—at face value.

“As I said in the hall, I have a debt to Her Majesty that I can never fully repay, and I wouldn't be able to bring myself to mistreat a woman who is the soul twin of my wife.”

The reginarch's gaze was sincere. It seemed that he was truly concerned for Sigrdrífa's well-being.

“While this is just a hunch, I still can't imagine it was Her Majesty who issued the subjugation order.”

“You may say that, but I can attest to the fact that it came from her lips,” Fagrahvél responded.

Yes, Fagrahvél had been there and heard the words herself. It was true that it seemed out of character, but it had still happened.

“I don't doubt your word there. However... What if she's being controlled? Say, by Hárbarth of the Spear Clan.”

“But, to manipulate Her Majesty...?”

Perhaps that would be possible through the power of a rune or seiðr. Even so, Sigrdrífa was a twin-runed Einherjar and the greatest seiðr wielder in all of Yggdrasil. To put her under one's spell would be impossible—the possibility hadn't even occurred to Fagrahvél.

“What if the act of summoning me here to Yggdrasil had drained all her power? Would it be possible, then?”

“Hrrrm...”

Fagrahvél struggled to process the thought.

It was true; the way that the Anti-Steel Clan Encirclement had come to pass was far too neat and seemed out of character for Sigrdrífa.

Adding onto that, the manner in which the clans surrounding the Steel Clan had been pulled in was very similar to the methods used by someone like Hárbarth, as the reginarch had pointed out. Things would certainly make more sense if that were the case.

“At the very least, we’re united in that we want to save Her Majesty. Trust me on that one.”

“Very well... I’ll leave it all to you.”

At this point, she was too far committed to do anything else. Fagrahvél had been left with little in the way of power and had no option but to put her trust in him.

“Bára! And the rest of you! I’m glad to see you’re all right!”

After meeting with the reginarch, Fagrahvél was reunited with the Maidens of the Waves for the first time in several days. They were all restrained with rope and were in a bit of a pitiable state, but she was still overcome with relief as she had feared that at least some of them hadn’t survived.

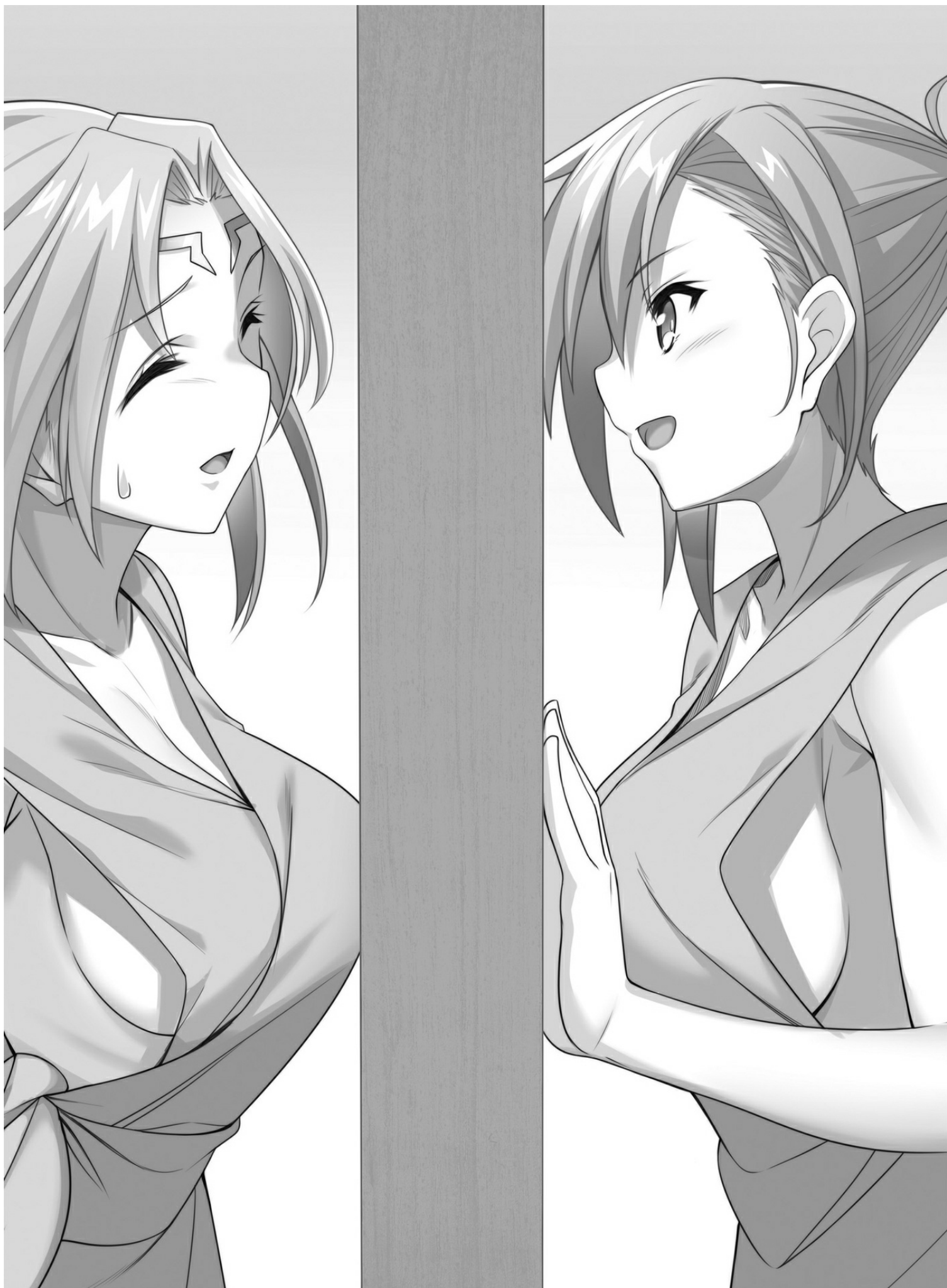
“Yes, we’re fiiiiine, but in the end even you got caught, it seeeems,” Bára said in a conflicted tone, though she still managed a faint smile.

It was unfortunate that Fagrahvél had been caught, but she was also relieved to see her unharmed.

“You have my apologies. You all fought hard for me, and in spite of that...”

Fagrahvél lowered her head and chewed on her lower lip.

Bára in particular had served as the rear guard at Dauwe Castle and faced certain death to try to help Fagrahvél escape.



To have allowed Bára to go to such lengths and then end up a captive anyway... She couldn't help but apologize to her.

"Nooo, not at all. If aaaanything, I should be the one to apologize, since I couldn't hooold them back for even a daaaay."

"For that to happen despite your direct leadership... Father is quite the warlord, it would seem..."

"Huh? Father...?" Erna looked over and asked upon hearing the word Fagrahvél had just uttered.

It was a difficult subject for Fagrahvél to broach with the Maidens who had fought for her sake and done so much out of respect and loyalty to her, but she also knew that she had a duty to give them that news.

"I refer to the Steel Clan reginarch. I will be accepting his chalice as his sworn child."

"Oh?!"

The Maidens of the Waves could not hide their shock. They were all proud of the fact that they were members of the great Sword Clan. No doubt all of them felt some measure of hesitation or shame at falling under the sway of another clan. Concerns about the clan's people, themselves, and other worries about the future no doubt played through their heads as well.

"Weeell, I suppose there's no other waaaay."

Evidently, Bára alone had expected this outcome and she murmured in resigned acceptance.

She was by far the most cunning of the Sword Clan. It was clear she'd processed the situation much better than the others.

"Aaaand? Whaaaat's to happen to Her Maaaajesty?"

Bára wasted no time in getting to the most important subject. While she spoke somewhat slowly, she was quick to get to the point.

"The situation is a bit complicated, but..."

With a nod, Fagrahvél began recounting her conversation with the reginarch.

She told the Maidens about how the reginarch felt a great debt of gratitude to the þjóðann, and that the reginarch's wife had an unusual connection with the þjóðann, and how, for those reasons, the reginarch had no intention of harming the þjóðann.

The tale was rather difficult to believe and the Maidens struggled to come to grips with it after hearing it from Fagrahvél. She herself knew it wasn't easy to believe and so forced the conversation to its conclusion.

"I'd like to believe him. Or rather, we have no other choice."

"Mm, you're riiight."

Bára noted her agreement, and the other eight nodded solemnly. They were all aware of the situation they faced.

"However!"

Fagrahvél then let out a breath and swallowed before she slowly put words to her grim determination.

"If Father ever goes against his word and attempts to harm Her Majesty, I fully intend to take upon myself the great sin of patricide."

"Oh?!"

The Maidens of the Waves reacted with much greater shock than they had earlier.

In Yggdrasil, one could not choose their birth parent, but they were free to choose their chalice parent. This was why one was obliged to obey their sworn parent, even if they demanded that one saw what was white as black.

With regard to the chalice system, the act of killing one's parent was the greatest sin of all. Indeed, it was a crime that would have one damned as a personification of betrayal to the end of times.

"Given that, I will forgive any of you if you wish to abandon our oaths. Speak freely if that's what you desire," Fagrahvél said intently as she faced the Maidens of the Waves.

To have an individual willing to commit patricide as a parent was a great dishonor. So much so that one wouldn't dare show their face in public. She

expected all of them to abandon her, but no matter how long she waited, none of them said a word.

“I understand it’s difficult to say in front of the others. No doubt you’ll be released once I’ve exchanged chalices with Father, then we can...”

“Dooooon’t be ridiculous! You’re our swoorn parent until the day we diie. Noooo, we’ll even follow you to the next liife. That’s what a chalice is, isn’t iiiit?”

“That’s just what we’re told to believe...”

Fagrahvél narrowed her eyes and shook her head. She was having a serious discussion. She didn’t want to hear that sort of cliché talk from the Maidens.

“You reaaally don’t get it, do yooou?”

“Mm? Get what?” Fagrahvél was quickly becoming more and more confused.

Bára smiled, a faint tinge of mischief present in her expression, and Fagrahvél could only tilt her head quizzically.

“Don’t you all agreeee?”

Bára then glanced over to the other Maidens of the Waves, who all nodded forcefully.

Just what is it that I’m not getting?

As the question ran through her head...

Erna raised her voice. It almost sounded like there was an edge of anger towards Fagrahvél in her tone.

“We all took your chalice not because we were born as people of the Sword Clan, but because we love and respect your character and personality, my lady!”

“Erna’s right! Why can’t you just ask us to follow you come hell or high water?!” Thír, too, asked with an angry shout.

It seemed the others were also of the same mind and were all nodding in agreement.

“If you believe in this, my laaady, then all we can possibly do is believe in your

choice. After all, we believe in you first and foremost.”

Fagrahvél thinned her lips into a line as she felt a rush of heat sting her eyes and pierce her chest. That much was certainly not enough to hold back the wave of emotion that suddenly crashed over her.

“Th-Thank you, all of you...”

She couldn’t hold back her emotions any longer... A sob escaped her throat and tears coursed down her cheeks. She had thought she’d run dry of tears after her talk with the reginarch and was surprised to find she still had this much left in her.

She was truly blessed with wonderful children. She felt that from the bottom of her heart.

At around the same time—

“Phew, I finally seem to have gotten things wrapped up.”

Yuuto let out a large sigh of relief in the lord’s chambers.

Finally, at long last, he was able to take care of the various problems that surrounded the issuing of the Steel Clan subjugation order. Not only that, but he had done so in the best possible way.

The main force of the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army was in retreat. The Sword Clan patriarch, Fagrahvél, and her retainers, the Maidens of the Waves, were all in custody. The Fang Clan patriarch, Sígismund, had been slain. They had also captured nearly ten thousand rank and file soldiers.

While the Spear Clan Second-in-Command, Hermóðr, and the Cloud Clan patriarch, Gerhard, were still at large, they were currently under pursuit.

Lastly—and by no means was it any small feat—he had sealed an agreement for Fagrahvél to become his sworn child.

With this, the great clan of the Northern Ásgarðr region, the Sword Clan, was now aligned with the Steel Clan, leaving nothing between him and the Holy Capital, Gláðsheimr.

Frankly, it felt like it had all gone too well.

But this was all due to—

“Congratulations, Father. This was, I believe, all due to your great leadership.”

Sigrún, who had been standing next to Yuuto, knelt in front of him. Tonight she was tasked with protecting him.

Felicia, who was ordinarily his bodyguard and executive officer, was overwhelmed with paperwork due to the influx of captives and was in the midst of sorting through that work.

“No, it was thanks to your hard work.”

“It was because you provided me with an opportunity to redeem myself, Father,” Sigrún said humbly.

She was likely referring to the fact that she had been fooled by the Sword Clan patriarch’s body double.

“You did nothing that needed redeeming. You really did well this time!”

With that, Yuuto placed his hand atop Sigrún’s head and ruffled her hair. He himself wasn’t sure how appropriate that was to do to a young woman, but given that she preferred this to gentle pats, he had no other choice.

More than anything he felt he didn’t have many other ways to show his appreciation for her work.

In this last conflict, Sigrún had been the greatest contributor.

During the battle, she had served as a skirmisher and reinforced sections of his line that had been facing collapse countless times.

Then, once it had become a pursuit battle, she had slain the Fang Clan patriarch, Sígismund, infiltrated Dauwe Castle through the escape route as the forlorn hope, and captured the Sword Clan general, Bára, alive, before she topped it off by capturing the Sword Clan patriarch and Alliance Army commander, Fagrahvél.

Her contribution was such that he could say without reservation that this great victory wouldn’t have been possible without her.

“♪”

Sigrún seemed to be rather comfortable and appeared to be completely at ease.

Looking at her present state, it was hard to imagine that she was, in fact, regarded not only as the greatest warrior of the Steel Clan, but of Yggdrasil itself.

It was also true that he felt an immense sense of possession and satisfaction knowing that he was the only one to see her in this state. She was adorable, and that adoration she felt toward him made his irritation at not being able to reward her all the worse.

“Hmm... Are you sure you just wanted to be petted?”

Yuuto once again asked the question that he had asked countless times before. He knew she thoroughly enjoyed it, but he still couldn't feel obligated to give her more.

“You've been helping me since before I even became patriarch, I'd like to reward you with something more. Is there anything else you want?”

Sigrún showed no interest in treasures, wealth, land, or even rank. While he'd heard from Felicia that she kept a glass bell he'd made for her birthday like a treasured heirloom in her room, of late he hadn't had time to make anything of that sort. Further, her contributions this time were enormous.

“It can be anything you want.”

“...Can it truly be anything?” She seemed to hesitate a moment, but evidently steeling herself, she asked thus.

Feeling as though he'd finally gotten his appreciation through to her, Yuuto responded eagerly.

“Ah ha! Of course! Anything you want. Don't hold back,” Yuuto said excitedly as he leaned forward.

It was a good opportunity. He wanted to reward her for all of her work up until this point. Even if she said she wanted her own clan, he was willing to grant it.

After all, they had just slain the Fang Clan patriarch. Installing her as its

successor wouldn't be a bad idea.

That was the direction that his thoughts had run to, but her wish was something that caught even "Suoh-Yuuto the War God" completely by surprise.

"Th-Then, I'd like you to care for me like you do Felicia and the Second!"

"...Wha?"

Yuuto couldn't help but sputter out a sound of pure surprise.

The Second referred to the Horn Clan patriarch, Linnea. He didn't recall treating the two of them any differently than Sigrún as sworn children. He had thought he'd treated them equally as their parent. That said, there was one thing he could think of that was common to the two of them...

"Uhh, uhm..."

Even Yuuto struggled to muster a coherent response. At his hesitation, Sigrún deflated, and a sullen expression quickly washed over her face.

"I suppose that's asking for too much?"

"Oh! Um, well..."

As she gazed up at him with puppy-dog eyes, he felt lightheaded and struggled for words.

Whatever else she was, Sigrún was certainly beautiful. Indeed, she was right up there with Felicia as one of the most beautiful women in the Steel Clan. If Felicia was the friendly, girl-next-door type, then Sigrún was the cool, mysterious beauty.

On top of that, the current contrast between her usual confident demeanor and her present shyness added a further charm that struck at his heart.

"B-But why all of a sudden?"

He had been aware, of course, that Sigrún harbored an intense love for him, though he had thought that was a love directed to a sworn parent, not a romantic one. At the very least, he'd never noticed any sense of that from her. It could just be that he was dense.

Sigrún nodded once, then said, "I wanted to bear your child, Father. Like

Mother.”

“I... I see.”

While he nodded, he had to admit it had caught him by surprise. It was perhaps a bit disrespectful, but he didn’t know she had such feminine aspirations. His thought process was also a way of avoiding the truth of what had been thrust in front of him.

“I am a warrior. My role is to wield my spear for you, Father. I thought now—with our campaign against the Alliance Army settled for the moment and winter fast approaching—would be the only time I could spare to bear your child.”

The bluntness of her assessment was very much in character for Sigrún. It was rational and completely understandable.

“Ah... um... Are you sure you want my kid?” Yuuto asked to confirm.

“Yes. Or rather, I don’t want any child but yours, Father,” Sigrún said matter-of-factly as she gazed intently into Yuuto’s eyes.

The purity and directness of her love made him falter. Even Yuuto struggled to immediately come to the right answer.

“My apologies. I have little in the way of expressiveness and am uncultured. I know I’m not your type. I’m sorry for troubling you with this request,” Sigrún said with a frail smile as though in deference to Yuuto’s inner conflict.

She also turned her back to Yuuto. Her shoulders trembled ever so faintly. Something inside of Yuuto snapped at that.

“Wait!”

Yuuto found himself wrapping his arms around Sigrún’s slender body.

“Fath...er?”

Sigrún’s expression turned to one of surprise in Yuuto’s arms. Tears faintly moistened the corners of her eyes.

He didn’t want her to leave him in heartbreak.



“I’m not opposed to having you bear my child.”

“T-Truly?!”

Sigrún’s expression lit up with joy like that of a puppy that was wagging its tail at the prospect of treats. Yuuto was genuinely touched by the affection she showed only to him.

“But... I need you to fight for a while longer. Which is why I can’t have you bear my child yet.”

“Oh! I suppose I’m not...”

“That’s not it!”

Sigrún had believed his remark to be a gentle denial, so Yuuto interjected vigorously. As though to emphasize his point, he squeezed her tightly in his arms.

“I can’t give you a child yet, but I can certainly love you.”

“Huh?”

“The future I’m from has convenient little things for that.”

With that, Yuuto gently pressed Sigrún onto the bed. With her strength, she could easily resist, but she did nothing of the sort. Yuuto draped himself over Sigrún and leaned his face down to hers.

“Past this point, a man can’t hold himself back.”

“...As you desire.”

Sigrún gazed intently back at Yuuto, then gently shut her eyes. Unusually for her, Sigrún’s lips were in a relaxed, gentle smile.

This was Yggdrasil. It was, in a way, an excuse for him as a man, but he may as well follow the local custom. Seeing her smile, he was firmly convinced that he needed to stop complicating his thoughts with things like modern values.

“Ooof. The world looks all hazy.”

With a tired expression, Felicia glanced up at the sky lightening with the first

rays of dawn.

A mountain of captives meant a mountain of administrative work. Securing enough food for them, determining where to place them, all the little details that were needed to keep them in place.

Linnea and Jurgen were in command of the overall logistical efforts back in Gimlé, which meant the administrative tasks on the front were, necessarily, left to Felicia.

This amount of work, though, was beyond her capabilities. She was reminded through experience just why Yuuto had designated those two as Second and Third. The fact that they could deal with such tedious and endless work filled her with heartfelt admiration.

She had stayed up all night working, but there were still piles and piles of paperwork to be done. With no end in sight, she was honestly at the end of her rope.

“For now, time for a nap...”

Felicia slumped her way toward Yuuto’s bedchambers.

She wanted to see her beloved Yuuto and cheer herself up before sleep.

“Good morning, Big... Brother...?”

Standing behind the door was Sigrún. That was fine. Since Felicia was otherwise occupied, she had been guarding Yuuto.

It seemed Yuuto was still asleep on the bed. That, too, was fine.

Felicia had come to cheer herself up by gazing upon his sleeping face.

The problem... was Sigrún’s appearance.

She was sat up in bed, sword in hand. She was undressed, and her small but shapely breasts were on display.

“Good morning, Felicia. Thanks for working so late.”

As she said this, Sigrún removed the blanket covering her lower body and stood from the bed. Her lower body, too, was naked.

“Um, well, good morning, Rún...”

Caught completely flatfooted by the circumstances and the fact Sigrún was acting as inscrutable as ever, Felicia offered a greeting in return.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll go get dressed.”

With that, Sigrún picked up her clothing from the floor near the bed and began to dress. She seemed relaxed at the fact that she was with a fellow woman, but Felicia felt a flare of irritation at just how unfazed Sigrún appeared to be. She wanted Sigrún to look happier about being loved by her big brother.

All this at a time when she was drowning in work...

The aforementioned flare quickly grew into full-blown indignation.

“Seems you enjoyed yourself last night.”

“Ah!”

Boom!

Sigrún’s face flushed beet red in an instant.

“Y-Yeah. I... I’ve never felt as fulfilled as I did last night.”

Sigrún glanced downward, mumbling her words shyly as she spoke.

Even Felicia, who had been Sigrún’s friend since their earliest years, had never seen her look this adorable.

“Oh my my my.”

Felicia’s expression curled up into a smile. It went without saying that Sigrún was teased mercilessly by Felicia after.

“Ah, so this is Sigtuna.”

Ten days after conquering Dauwe Castle, the Steel Clan Army, under Yuuto’s command, swarmed the Sword Clan capital of Sigtuna.

The combination of an enormous army numbering twenty thousand and the sight of their captive patriarch Fagrahvél broke the will of the defenders quickly, leading to a peaceful surrender of the city.

“Whoa, it’s huge!”

Yuuto exclaimed with excitement as he paraded down the main road leading to the palace by chariot.

While the houses were made up of the same brick construction as those in Gimlé, the Hliðskjálf was on a completely different scale entirely.

“I-It’s certainly very large...”

Felicia, who accompanied him upon his chariot, stared up in awe at the Hliðskjálf.

The largest Yuuto had seen to this point had been the one in the Horn Clan capital of Fólkvangr, but this city’s far outclassed even theirs in size. It was a feature that attested to the clan’s proud history dating back to the rise of the empire.

“I suppose hoping for a welcome parade was too much,” Yuuto said with a self-deprecating laugh.

He’d made a cursory assessment of the city’s mood with a quick glance. There wasn’t a single person out in the city who wasn’t part of the Steel Clan’s army. It was enough to make him think that their procession was marching through a ghost town.

Of course, the population was still very much there.

Ordinarily, the invasion of another clan’s realms would result in wide-scale looting, which is why it was understandable that the population would shut themselves in their homes out of fear.

“M-My apologies, Father. I will offer whatever contrition you require for my peoples’ disrespect, so please refrain from being too harsh on them,” the chariot’s other occupant, Fagrahvél, said nervously.

While she’d heard through various reports that Yuuto didn’t allow his men to loot the territory they captured, it was somewhat unavoidable that she’d be anxious about the welfare of her people. Yuuto himself understood her concerns and waved his hand to show that the attitude of the citizenry didn’t bother him.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. I know that’s just how it is.”

“Indeed, it’s all right, Lady Fagrahvél. Big Brother is a kind and forgiving man.”

“Thank you...”

Felicia’s reassurance appeared to help, and Fagrahvél’s expression softened as she let out a sigh of relief. Soon after, the chariot carrying the three of them cleared the main street and arrived at the Hliðskjálf they had seen earlier.

“It really is enormous up close!”

Yuuto once again felt awe at the sheer size of the building.

Of course, as someone from the modern world, he was familiar with much larger buildings, but those were constructed using the various technologies available. None of that existed in Yggdrasil, and it all had to be done through nothing more than manual labor.

To create something so large under those circumstances was a remarkable achievement. Yuuto, as a ruler, knew just how epic the scale of the effort would have been.

“The Hliðskjálf in the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr is even larger.”

“Seriously?!”

At Fagrahvél’s words, Yuuto couldn’t help but turn to face her.

There’s one even bigger than this one?

“Oh, right, I seem to recall Her Majesty saying something like that.”

“Yes. If you’re surprised by Sigtuna, you might well have a heart attack when you see the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr. The Hliðskjálf is, of course, impressive, but I believe you’d be more in awe at the sheer number of people living there.”

“Huh, really.”

Though he gave off the impression that he agreed with the things she was saying, Yuuto found himself feeling rather skeptical about the second point she had made. Based on the current technology Yggdrasil had available to it, the most he could imagine even the Holy Capital being able to house was a population of about a hundred thousand or so.

Given the time period, housing that many people in such a space was an

impressive achievement in and of itself, but as someone from 21st-century Japan, he found himself scoffing at the idea of it surpassing the crowds he witnessed on his trips to Tokyo.

He couldn't help but feel the differences in mindset between himself and those native to Yggdrasil when such examples came up.

For a while after, Yuuto continued to listen to Fagrahvél describe the Holy Capital and Sigtuna until Felicia called over to him.

"Big Brother, it appears they are ready."

Two hours had passed before he'd realized it, and while he hadn't been paying attention, a crowd had gathered around the Hliðskjálf.

The soldiers had gone around shouting the summons through the city, announcing that the Reginarch had ordered all citizens to gather in front of the Hliðskjálf.

At first, it appeared they were afraid of the Steel Clan soldiers, but they soon understood that the troops weren't going to partake in any form of looting or pillaging. Instead, it was more likely that they were now concerned with drawing their ire by not listening to their commands.

"All right. While I'm sorry to make a spectacle out of it, let's do this as we arranged."

"I understand. This will also help reassure the people."

As she nodded in response, Fagrahvél began climbing the Hliðskjálf. Yuuto followed after her.

There was an opening that led outside some way up the building, so the two of them exited through it. The spot offered a good look at the space below them and provided a platform that carried their voices. It was a spot often used for rituals intended for the people or to fire up the troops.

"We will now conduct the auspicious ceremony of the Oath of the Chalice, sealing a bond of parent and child! The parent shall be the First Reginarch of the Steel Clan, Lord Suoh-Yuuto, and the child shall be the Thirteenth Patriarch of the Sword Clan, Lady Fagrahvél!"

Amplified by a large megaphone, Sigrún's dignified voice rang through the area. The assembled crowd's expression turned to one of surprise at the sheer volume. It appeared that this spectacle had captured their attention.

"Then, in hope of blessings upon the First Steel Clan Lord's family, those present here today, and the new familial bonds they have now forged, we shall ask you to bless this new family with your applause. If you please... Reaaaady!"

"Congratulations!"

Upon Sigrún's closing statements, the Hliðskjálf was engulfed in a sea of applause. Truth was, there were Steel Clan soldiers planted within the crowd ahead of time, but of course, humans were prone to go with the flow. With those around them clapping, the citizens of the Sword Clan, too, began clapping, and the volume of the applause swelled. This was how they had secured the legitimacy of their conquest in the minds of the Sword Clan's people.

"Father, once again, I'm pleased to be under your command. My family shall do all in our power to loyally serve you and the Steel Clan," Fagrahvél said stiffly, bowing her head solemnly.

This act of deference showed just how desperately she wanted to improve the þjóðann's situation. If she could prove herself to him, then things should work out for the better.

"Yeah, thanks. I'm counting on you. More than anything for Her Majesty's sake!" Yuuto said as he quirked his lips into a grin.

The words had their desired effect. Fagrahvél's eyes lit up, as if to say 'you read my mind.'

"Indeed! For that purpose, I shall go wherever you order, come hell or high water, with the Maidens of the Waves in tow, to whatever deadly battlefield you desire and eliminate your enemies!"

"Heh, I'm counting on you."

At her bluntly straightforward remark, Yuuto couldn't help but let out a chuckle.

It was true that she wasn't exactly a respectful child, but she was easy to understand. At the very least, so long as he treated the þjóðann well, an Einherjar with Gjallarhorn—a rune known as the rune of kings—and her retainers, the nine elite Einherjar of the Maidens of the Waves, would serve him without question.

Right now, what was important were actual benefits, not abstract notions of respect.

“How reassuring to have them on our side.”

Felicia, who had been standing near him, softly spoke into his ear.

“Yep, indeed.”

Yuuto made a show of nodding in agreement.

It was still uncertain when precisely Yggdrasil would fall into the sea. Clans such as the Spear Clan must have suffered losses in the last battle. The truth was that Yuuto wanted to advance upon the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr as quickly as possible. To that end, adding a great clan like the Sword Clan to his side was a great boon.

“I need to get this taken care of before that monster makes his way onto the stage...”

Furrowing his brow, Yuuto thought of the Flame Clan patriarch, Oda Nobunaga, who he'd recently met in Stórk.

Clutched in his hand was an express note from Linnea, the Second-in-Command. There were no carrier pigeons to Sigtuna, and since there was no post-horse network this far out, the information it contained was somewhat old, but it reported that the Lightning Clan's capital had been conquered by the Flame Clan led by Nobunaga and that the clan itself had been destroyed.

It was proof of just how ridiculous his opponent was.

He honestly hadn't believed there'd be anyone who could bring down Steinþórr Dólgprásir, the Battle-Hungry Tiger, at least not in any contest of strength.

The speed with which the Flame Clan patriarch had cleaned up the Lightning

Clan's remaining forces was also something Yuuto found both frightening and impressive.

"With nothing behind him, there's no stopping his advance to the capital, I guess."

Yuuto swallowed hard.

At the moment, with the Sword Clan under his rule, he was a step ahead on the path to taking the Holy Capital, but his opponent was a legendary figure who was well-known in Japanese history for being unconstrained by the usual rules suffered by mere mortals. He had no room for error.

"All right, Felicia. Send a carrier pigeon to Linnea. Our supply lines are stretched thin. For now, we should..."

"I-I bear a message!"

As Yuuto began to dictate his directions, a soldier entered the room and interrupted him with a shout. He had evidently run straight up the stairs; his breathing was ragged and his face was flushed red with exertion.

"What is it?!"

Yuuto couldn't shake a terrible feeling as he asked the question. He'd experienced this sort of situation several times before. It automatically made him assume the worst.

"H-Her Majesty, the þjóðann, is here."

"Err?"

He didn't understand at first.

"She stated that she wished to surrender in person..."

"Whaaaat?!" Yuuto blurted out in a questioning tone.

It was true that he wanted to secure the þjóðann Sigrdrífa. He was, frankly, grateful that she had appeared to hand herself over to him. This, however, just seemed far too convenient. His feeling of dread only seemed to deepen.

ACT 5

“Her Majesty awaits you in here.”

Escorted by Erna, Yuuto was led to a particular room.

Sigtuna’s palace was by far the largest Yuuto had seen anywhere in Yggdrasil. It was befitting of such a great clan. Inside the room, an extremely familiar-looking young woman was lit by pure, white light.

“Y-Your Majesty! You’re safe!” Fagrahvél, who had been standing near him, said happily and ran toward her.

Indeed, it was Sigrdrífa, þjóðann of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire.

While he had met her before, no matter how many times he looked at her, she resembled his beloved wife, Mitsuki.

But there was something... Something that felt different from before.

Was it simply because it had been a while since they’d last met?

“Ahh, Fagrahvél. You’re alive. That gladdens my heart.”

“Yes. Unable to fulfill your orders, I find myself shamed by my failure. But even in that shame, I’m truly glad to once again see you, Your Majesty.”

“Pay it no mind. You were simply matched against the wrong opponent.”

Sigrdrífa patted Fagrahvél on the shoulder to try to reassure her. It was the very image of a generous sovereign forgiving her subordinate, which was why it felt off.

“It has been a while, Your Majesty.”

Yuuto made a point to address her formally. When she had stayed at Iárnviðr, it had been “Lady Rífa.” It was only vaguely so, but she hated being called “Your Majesty.” She had truly enjoyed being referred to by her name.

There was a sense that, free from the constraints of the palace and her responsibilities as þjóðann, she was able—for a while—to avoid the “special

treatment” that she so hated.

He’d thought she’d react negatively to being addressed this way. However...

“Mm. It has indeed been a while, Reginarch of the Steel Clan.”

Sigrdrífa smiled seductively at him and returned his greeting.



Yuuto continued to feel more and more uneasy about her...

Sigrdrífa used to address Yuuto as Lord Yuuto. This inconsistency could reasonably be shrugged off due to the fact that they were in a formal setting, but her smile was also different from how he remembered.

“How do I put it? You seem to have changed a bit.”

“Hah. Six months is more than enough time for people to change. You’re no exception, are you?”

Rífa casually dodged Yuuto’s attempt to probe her. Phrased that way, he himself was aware that he too had changed quite a bit over the last six months.

“Well then, shall I show you I am who I claim to be?”

With that, Rífa closed her eyes, and after a moment’s pause, opened them again. In her eyes were the twin sigils that proved she was the reigning þjóðann.

The ásmegin that enveloped her body increased in intensity to the point where even Yuuto, despite his inability to feel or see such things, could feel the change in the room. There was no way to deny that she was, in fact, Sigrdrífa herself.

“Well then, Your Majesty. I hear you wish to surrender to us?”

With a creak, Yuuto settled into the chair across from Rífa and asked the question with a skeptical gaze.

“Indeed, that is so. I have come as a direct representative of the empire. We, the empire, shall surrender to your Steel Clan. With regard to the subjugation order, we will provide you an apology and rescind it, effective immediately.”

Following her statement, Sigrdrífa bowed her head deeply.

It was surprising to see her apologize so easily, especially given her privileged upbringing as the þjóðann—not to mention her personality, one tinged with an arrogance that could only be explained by the entitlement of a royal upbringing.

It could be dismissed as personal growth, but it still felt off.

“...T-Truly, Your Majesty?”

It was Fagrahvél, not Yuuto, who asked the question. The color had drained

from her face in its entirety.

“M-My apologies, Your Majesty! The shame I feel for being the one responsible for bringing an end to the proud two-hundred-year history of the empire is immeasurable...”

It appeared she felt responsible for the outcome. Her guilt was understandable given that her army of thirty thousand had been routed by the Steel Clan’s mere ten thousand.

Sigrdrífa raised her head and spoke with a determined cast in her eye.

“I have no intention of letting it end. Rather, I’m here to make sure it doesn’t end.”

“Which means...?” Yuuto asked suspiciously.

There was a note of deviousness lurking beneath her words.

“Meaning, Lord Yuuto, I’m asking if you will marry me and take the throne as þjóðann yourself.”

That night—

“So, what do you think?”

Yuuto summoned Fagrahvél to his room and immediately got to the point. He had managed to buy time on the matter of marriage, citing the need for careful consideration given the sheer scale of what had been proposed.

Yes, there was definitely an enormous advantage to becoming þjóðann. However...

“For me, I can’t shake the feeling there’s something off about Her Majesty,” Yuuto said without hesitation.

Certainly, given the right opportunity, people can change dramatically, even over the course of a mere few days. Yuuto himself knew that from personal experience. The day he lost both his sworn father and older brother, his old self had fallen away. It was perfectly plausible that something of the sort could well have happened to her as well.

But there was *something* different about the current situation.

“Yes, I have known her since we were both children, but I too feel there’s something off about her.”

Fagrahvél furrowed her brow in thought as she nodded her agreement.

She and Sigrdrífa were milk siblings. If even she felt something was different about her, they couldn’t stand to ignore that sign.

“Possibilities are a galdr or seiðr. There’s also the possibility of drugs or hypnosis. On this, I’d like your input as well, Felicia.”

Yuuto directed his gaze to his assistant standing nearby. Felicia directed her eyes upward in thought, spending a few moments considering before speaking.

“I’m sorry. I have never heard of any techniques of that sort, either,” she said apologetically, glancing down at the ground.

I suppose it’s never that simple, Yuuto thought, and let out a disappointed sigh.

“However...”

“Mm?”

“I sense there’s something different about her soul, a change in her aura.”

It was vague and difficult to put into words.

For Yuuto, who as a non-Einherjar couldn’t sense ásmegin, it was a hard concept to grasp, but it seemed it struck a chord with Fagrahvél.

“Oh! Yes, now that you mention it! So that’s what feels off about her!”

She nodded intently, as though something finally made sense to her. Her rune was also closer to that of a seiðr user. That probably let her sense that change.

“Despite looking so energetic and healthy, her soul’s aura is awfully weak!”

“Oh, of course! So that’s why she seemed odd!”

Felicia brought her fist down on her palm as though she’d come to some realization. It wasn’t helping when only they seemed to get it. He felt completely left out of the conversation.

“Then, I believe it’s safe to assume that old monster is controlling her. To control Her Majesty and try to manipulate her to his advantage... That is a crime bordering on blasphemy!” Fagrahvél said heatedly, an unusual display of emotion that belied her anger. She made no effort of hiding her hatred.

He needed to confirm who she was referring to.

“Am I correct in assuming the ‘old monster’ refers to Hárbarth? The patriarch of the Spear Clan and the empire’s High Priest?”

“Yes. He had previously shunted Her Majesty aside and had been running the empire as though it were his own, but I had never imagined he’d go this far...!”

Fagrahvél balled her hands into fists, as though to try to find an outlet for her frustration. Likely she was wishing the man himself was here so she could pound him into the floor.

“What’s he like? His personality, I mean.”

He started with a simple question. It was almost certain that Hárbarth was behind the þjóðann’s direct offer of surrender. No doubt some scheme lay hidden under the surface of the proposal.

The war they were fighting now wasn’t one of swords, spears, and bows. It was a diplomatic war that mixed truth and lies as its weapons of choice.

Then, while perhaps rude to phrase this way, it was important to know not about Rífa, who was merely another piece on the chess board, but the hand moving the pieces on the other side of the board.

“Let’s see. In a word, he’s a knave that’s too clever for his own good. Our Bára is quite resourceful when it comes to trickery, but he has a cunning that exceeds even hers. I suppose that about sums him up.”

“Oh, really? I’ve heard Bára was able to fool even my brother Hveðrungr. To be even better than that...”

Yuuto widened his eyes in surprise.

A knave that’s too clever for his own good. The description, at first, made him seem like a petty figure, but it was often the case that in conflict, the smallest gaps can create opportunities that wind up making a significant difference.

Yuuto was well aware that when push comes to shove, it wasn't the calm, unflappable leader, unbothered by nagging details that was the strongest, but rather, it was often the petty sorts.

In that sense, Hveðrungr had been quite a bothersome opponent.

For there to be someone who was above even that sort of level... It would seem that the world always had a bigger fish.

"Yes, he's devilishly good at gathering information, manipulating that information, and using it to seal off the avenues of his escape for his opponents and slowly corner them into doing his bidding. While I don't know how he did it, at Vígríðr he fed us information about the movements and locations of the cavalry, when they'd attack, and all the other details through Alexis."

"Ah, if I recall, he's known as Skilfingr, the Watcher from on High."

Yuuto had heard of that nickname, but it seemed the man was even more dangerous than he had thought. It was true that Hveðrungr had noted the enemy was completely aware of where they had been, but this provided backing for that suspicion.

In Yggdrasil, there were no military satellites, cell phones, or anything of that sort—Hárbarth's ability was quite remarkable indeed.

"If he can see that well, we should assume he's listening to this conversation as well. I suppose I'm not one to talk, but yeesh, that's a cheat ability if there ever was one."

Yuuto gazed up at the ceiling, the chair creaking as he rested his weight against the back. His opponent could see his cards, while he couldn't see his opponent's hand. To play out a battle of wits and bluffing under these circumstances could only be described as a mighty challenge.

"Tch, but I suppose nothing ventured, nothing gained. I'll have to take the challenge."

Yuuto clicked his tongue and scowled bitterly.

Being able to use the þjóðann as a pawn to garner and maintain control over all of Yggdrasil was something he desired greatly. Moreover, she was someone

he owed a debt to, and she was a vital piece in terms of keeping the powerful Sword Clan aligned with him.

In that sense, rather than returning her to the empire due to the risk she represented, it was probably best to keep her close at hand.

“I’m not that good at this sort of game, but I suppose I’ll take all the measures I can for now.”

Yuuto let out a weary sigh. He didn’t like dealing with cloak-and-dagger schemes.

He much preferred doing everything he could to put himself into a position to win and crushing his opponent’s plans with overwhelming force.

And so, he decided—that was what he was going to do.

“We thank you for waiting. We, the Steel Clan, intend to accept the empire’s surrender.”

The next day, Yuuto invited Sigrdrífa to breakfast, and those were the first words out of his mouth.

Upon the circular table sat a hamburger, a dish that Rífa had been extremely impressed with during her stay at lárarviðr. Despite the fact that at the time, Rífa had been thoroughly taken by the dish, today she only gave it a suspicious glance.

Again, her reaction felt off.

“Ah, indeed. I’m grateful.”

Rífa smiled elegantly, not giving so much as a glance to the hamburger.

With that, Yuuto renewed his determination. He switched his mindset over to that of a patriarch.

Discarding sentiment, he closed off his emotions.

“However, the fact of the matter is that the Steel Clan subjugation order put us in an extraordinary amount of danger. Even considering we’re dealing with the empire itself, to let this pass without any cost would damage my authority

as reginarch.”

Gazing coolly at Rífa, Yuuto stated thus with a sharp-edged, intimidating voice.

When did he first notice it? The dangerous beast lurking deep within his heart that, when let loose, could be used to effortlessly overwhelm and intimidate those around him.

At first it had only manifested in times of extreme anger, and he hadn't been able to control it, but around the time he had returned to Yggdrasil, he had gained some control over it.

He consciously focused and released this power; the Conqueror's Aura.

“M-Mm... W-Well, i-it is as you say.”

It worked effectively and Rífa was visibly unnerved and taken aback. It was an aura that intimidated even the Sword Clan patriarch, Fagrahvél, and her Maidens of the Waves.

However powerful Rífa was as a twin-runed Einherjar, having been raised as a sheltered princess, it was evidently too much for her to handle. The only thing left for him to do was push his advantage.

“There are three conditions to the surrender. First, Your Majesty will become my second formal wife,” Yuuto said and held up his index finger.

He had already cleared the details with Fagrahvél. This marriage would be a political marriage—a marriage in name only. Whether or not it would be consummated would be entirely up to Rífa.

The marriage itself would only be to acquire the authority of the þjóðann. Considering the importance of marriage to women, he felt a tad guilty about it, but from a strategic standpoint it was non-negotiable.

“Th-That will be fine. I am the one who proposed it after all.”

Although her expression was still tense, Rífa appeared to have recovered somewhat and nodded.

After confirming this, Yuuto held up his second finger.

“Second, formally issuing the rescinding of the Steel Clan subjugation order throughout Yggdrasil.”

“That’s a perfectly understandable term, yes.”

“And the all-important third condition.”

Yuuto prefaced his statement as he held up his third finger.

“We do not believe the Steel Clan subjugation order was at Your Majesty’s behest. Our belief is that the Spear Clan patriarch, Hárbarth, is the one behind the scheme. As such, we, the Steel Clan, demand the head of Hárbarth for his responsibility in orchestrating this entire incident!”

Well, how will you respond now? Yuuto quietly thought to himself as a smirk crept across his face.

The most troublesome aspect of a negotiation tended to be when the strong party tried to force through terms. Meaning, Yuuto determined that the best course of action would be to simply demand the head of the enemy leader.

Surely they couldn’t accept this condition. This particular demand was little more than a bluff to gain the upper hand in the negotiations, but—

“Understood. That’s all acceptable.”

“Huh...?”

Yuuto was left gaping in surprise as Rífa easily accepted the terms without the faintest sign of hesitation. He struggled to comprehend what had just happened.

Regardless, that was how the surrender negotiations between the Steel Clan and the empire concluded.

“So that’s the Black One.”

In a corner of Valaskjálf Palace, Hárbarth spat out those words and quirked his lips in a smile.

He was an old man with his hair devoid of color and his face heavily lined with age. A vertical scar from a sword wound covered what had been his left eye, but

the remaining eye had a predatory gleam worthy of a bird of prey, showing its owner's spirit remained undiminished.

“Facing him in person was something else entirely. He has a frighteningly distinguished air. It's hard to believe he's still a boy.”

While the panic had been an act, he had, in fact, felt intimidated.

Though Hárbarth now manipulated the levers of power within the empire, in his youth he had been through his share of life-and-death situations. He had faced off against individuals worthy of being called heroes and, at times, fought them. Even then, he had never seen anyone with a Conqueror's Aura of that power.

“An aura worthy of the one the oracle Völva had prophesied would end the empire.”

Hárbarth let out a self-deprecating snort.

That meeting had signaled the end of the two hundred year history of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire at the hands of the Black One. As one who had spent his adult life securing power within the empire, he couldn't help but feel some sadness.

Only some, of course.

“Hrmph. As expected, he wants my head.”

Holding his hand to his throat, Hárbarth laughed drily.

It was well within his expectations. The Steel Clan had made Fagrahvél the reginarch's child and absorbed the Sword Clan. Once they had heard that Hárbarth was the effective ruler of the empire, and considering the overwhelming advantage in power enjoyed by the Steel Clan, it was easy to guess that they would demand his head.

“Well, while this certainly throws my plans into disarray, it will not be an issue in the long run. It simply means I'll have to move more quickly.”

Two days had passed since the Steel Clan's meeting with the þjóðann Sigrdrífa.

“So this is really Hárbarth?”

In a corner of Sigtuna’s palace, Yuuto, with a faintly disgusted grimace, asked Fagrahvél.

His eyes were directed at a clay pot she held. Inside of it was the severed head of the Spear Clan patriarch and High Priest, Hárbarth, preserved in alcohol.

The sight was a touch too macabre and Yuuto backed away after giving it a quick look.

“...Yes, there’s no mistaking him.”

Even Fagrahvél had a sour expression on her face, but after peering intently into the pot, nodded.

“Any chance it’s a double?” Yuuto asked as he turned away from the pot.

“It’s nooooot possible. It woould be quite a feat to find another maaaaan who’s this oooolld.”

Adding to the explanation with her usual languid speech was Bára, who shook her head from side to side.

She, too, was another who knew Hárbarth, and had declared it to be him.

“Ahh, I suppose. All right then.”

Yuuto nodded as though content.

Here in Yggdrasil, the food situation was much more precarious and the medicine far more primitive than in 21st-century Japan. This was a world where the average life expectancy was under fifty, with people dying at an age that a modern Japanese person would consider late middle-age at best. While he didn’t know just exactly how old Hárbarth had been, he’d heard that he’d lived to an almost eerily old age.

Realistically, it would be impossible to find someone that was both old enough and similar-looking enough to Hárbarth to fool someone like Fagrahvél who knew his features well.

“Which means this head is without a doubt his,” he muttered to himself.

However, he couldn't shake the feeling he was being played in some way. Things simply seemed to be going too well.

"Are you finished with your confirmation?"

Sigrdrífa, who had been sitting in a chair a short distance away, asked in a casual tone.

She had been holed up in her room until yesterday, noting that it had been that time of month, but she seemed to be doing better today, the color having returned to her cheeks.

"Yes, it seems to be Hárbarth himself," Yuuto stated coldly.

"I have also issued a decree rescinding the Steel Clan subjugation order."

"We have also confirmed that."

Yuuto had, indeed, confirmed the contents of the tablets pressed with the þjóðann's sigil. He had also gotten a report from Kristina that the announcement had been made before an assembled crowd in Glaðsheimr.

"Then all that's left is... our marriage, I believe."

"Mm..."

The ease with which everything proceeded continued to nag at Yuuto. He felt there was something behind all of this, but he couldn't say for certain what precisely that was.

Though, given that Hárbarth was dead, perhaps he was overthinking it? Was it that he was just anxious because everything seemed to be going too well?

"I look forward to having a long life at your side, my husband."

The þjóðann smiled faintly toward him. The marriage was something she had proposed. They had swallowed all of the other conditions. There simply wasn't enough reason to decline. To not do it now would simply be an embarrassment.

"...Yes, I look forward to it, too."

Yuuto couldn't help but feel manipulated by something, but for now he could only nod in agreement.

“Phew. That’s the first step done.”

In the room provided to her, Sigrdrífa—or rather, the spirit of Hárbarth that lurked within her—smirked.

His body had died, but his soul remained. He had managed to achieve this by possessing Sigrdrífa’s body.

“Still, a woman’s body is a bothersome thing indeed.”

It was true that it had been that time of the month until just yesterday. It had taken quite a bit of effort to deal with, and so long as he inhabited this body, he felt everything she felt, meaning that he had endured that pain.

The constant pain brought with it a sort of depression. The past few days had been awful.

“While I may have had no choice, I really do need to switch to another body. Dealing with this regularly would be much too troublesome, not to mention unpleasant.”

He snorted in self-mockery.

This body was only a temporary dwelling. His true objective was Sigrdrífa’s child.

While Hárbarth had indeed controlled the empire, he had been so old he could keel over at any time. His frail body no longer moved as he wished, he was often sick, and he had cowered from death practically every day he lived.

So he had wondered...

The power that let him possess small animals. His power as an Einherjar. If used correctly, perhaps it could bring him eternal life.

It was true that he couldn’t possess conscious people, but he had confirmed he could possess those who were in a coma, like Rífa, and also newborn babies.

If he could possess a child between himself and Rífa, he could gain both the twin runes and the title of þjóðann. In effect, he could quite easily gain ability and authority along with renewed youth. With those things, he could reign over Yggdrasil as its absolute and immortal ruler. That was the true extent of Hárbarth’s plan.

“I would have preferred to gain a body that carried my blood, but alas.”

If he were to reside within the body of a child between the reginarch and the þjóðann, he would still have a strong claim to the throne. Her royal bloodline gave him the legitimacy that Hárbarth so desperately required to make full use of his pawn—her child.

Indeed, if necessary, he could very well have the child in the First Queen’s stomach quietly disposed of down the line.

“But to think I would have to lie with a man... Better to have lain with an empty shell of a woman, but I suppose I’m in no position to be choosy.”

With that, she stood from her bed. The night had grown late. Leaving her room, she headed to the reginarch’s bedchambers.

“Y-Your Majesty! Wh-What are you here for?”

A bodyguard stationed in front of the room asked in a panicked tone.

To the denizens of Yggdrasil, the þjóðann was a living god, an object of veneration, even worship. It was understandable to panic when coming face to face with such a personage.

“Surely there is only one reason to visit one’s future husband.”

“Ah? Ah! Of course, my apologies!”

With a respectful bow, the guard allowed her entry into the room.

While the room was a guest room, like the room provided to the þjóðann, it was large and well-appointed. Waiting there was not just the reginarch, but also a blonde-haired beauty.

“Y-Your Majesty?! At this time of night?” the blonde-haired beauty asked in surprise.

“As I told the guard, I’m here to consummate our relationship.”

“...You’re in a bit of a hurry,” the reginarch said with a dry laugh.

Hárbarth was aware of this, but he couldn’t stand the inconveniences of a female body. His honest desire was to get a new body as soon as possible, but of course, that couldn’t be said out loud.

“I’ve been frail since the day of my birth. Frankly, I don’t know when I might collapse from illness. I’d like to bear a child as quickly as possible to make sure my line continues.”

“Mm, I see. Felicia, could you leave us for a bit?”

“Oh?! B-Big Brother?! But...”

Felicia anxiously looked over at the reginarch, who simply shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s not a problem. Surely the þjóðann herself wouldn’t do much in a situation like this. Oh, also, I have something I’d like to ask of you.”

He gestured her over and whispered something in her ear.

Sigrdrífa—Hárbarth, couldn’t hear what was being said, but...

“As you wish, Big Brother.”

The blonde-haired beauty nodded as though she was fully satisfied with his explanation, and began to approach.

“Your Majesty. Begging your pardon, but I will have to check you for weapons.”

“Mm, very well.”

She nodded magnanimously.

Since assassination wasn’t the objective, her body carried no weapons.

Given it wasn’t his own body, he felt no shame. No matter how thoroughly the woman checked, it was of no consequence.

“...I’m done. My apologies. Forgive me for the intrusion, Your Majesty.”

The search finished without issue, and the blonde-haired beauty bowed her head.

“Not to worry, I understand you’re only doing your duty.”

“Thank you. Then I will see myself out.”

The blonde-haired beauty bowed once again and left the room.

After seeing her out, Sigrdrífa—Hárbarth—sat down next to the reginarch and

leaned into him.

“We’re finally alone.”

The moment the words left her lips, Hárbarth felt a shiver of revulsion, but he kept it from showing in Rífa’s expression. He then placed her hand over the reginarch’s.

As a man with power, Hárbarth had seen countless women flock to him. For the moment he mimicked their mannerisms as best he could.

“Now, hurry and make me yours. With that, you will be the next þjóðann in both name and fact.”

Those sweet words were uttered without delay.

So far as Hárbarth was aware, men had an endless appetite for power. This was particularly true for those that climbed their way upward. For someone of that sort, the words ‘the next þjóðann’ must surely be the ultimate bait.

This was a man who had gone from patriarch of a tiny clan to a reginarch controlling vast swaths of territory. Hárbarth was certain that he was that sort of man, but...

“Now, surely there’s no hurry. We haven’t had an opportunity to just talk. Why don’t we take the time to reminisce a little?” he said toward her, a gentle smile on his face.

Internally, Hárbarth clicked his tongue in frustration.

Even if he was the greatest information gatherer in Yggdrasil, he didn’t have the fine details of what Sigrdrífa had done during her stay in lárniðr.

To keep from slipping up on such matters, he had done his best to avoid the subject as much as possible, but the bothersome topic had finally come up.

“For my part, I should prefer to speak of the future rather than the past.”

For the moment, he tried to change the subject. Given that he had assumed the reginarch was blinded by ambition, he had been caught off guard.

“Ah, when you make your triumphant visit to the Holy Capital, I’ll make sure to show you around Valaskjálf Palace myself. No doubt it’s far greater than

anything you've ever seen."

"Oh?"

It would seem that remark had drawn his interest. Hárbarth relaxed himself in relief. That had been a close one.

There was no time for him to lose on bearing a suitable child, the risks of a misstep were much too high.

"Once I am your wife, it will all belong to you. How about it? Does that not please you?"

With those words, Hárbarth had somehow managed to get the conversation back on the topic he intended for it.

He considered for a short moment if he should perhaps be more assertive and make the first move. As he was doing so, however...

"It's true, I'm looking forward to it, but... Ah, seems she's here."

The door to the bedchambers opened with a sudden creaking noise.

The one who stepped into the room, with a silver-haired beauty in tow, was a young woman who was the spitting image of Sigrdrífa.

"Your Majesty, my wife wishes to make your acquaintance."

Quirking his lips into a grin, Yuuto waved his hand over at Mitsuki and introduced her.

She had arrived in Sigtuna earlier that afternoon. Mitsuki had told him that she had a strange connection with Sigrdrífa.

Because of that, he believed that he might be able to learn something by having the two of them closely interact. Though he was worried about her pregnancy, she was in a much more stable condition now, so he'd had her summoned to Sigtuna. Further, rather than waiting alone for Yuuto to return to Gimlé, she would feel more relaxed and avoid undue stress by being with her husband.

All in all, they had reasoned it would be better for the child in the long term.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty. I am Mitsuki, Yuuto Suoh’s wife.”

Mitsuki approached Sigrdrífa and lightly bowed her head.

Looking at them, they really did look alike. No one would question it if they had been described as twin sisters.

“M-Mm. A pleasure to meet you. I had heard rumors, but I’m surprised to note just how much you resemble me.”

It seemed that this situation hadn’t been accounted for, and Sigrdrífa’s statement, as a result, sounded somewhat panicked.

Got you, Yuuto thought to himself. He was now certain that the Sigrdrífa in front of him was an imposter.

This wasn’t their first meeting.

While this *was* their first meeting in person, they had met on countless occasions in their dreams.

He had been worried that whoever was controlling Sigrdrífa would try to bluff their way out of the situation, but they stepped right into his trap.

‘I had heard rumors.’

The real Sigrdrífa would never have said that.

Hearing this, Yuuto glanced over at Mitsuki. She, too, nodded.

“Your Majesty, it’s not just our appearance that’s alike.”

“Mm?”

Sigrdrífa furrowed her brow in suspicion. Evidently unable to read their intentions, she seemed a bit on guard.

There were no problems with what she had said, though.

“You see, I bear the twin runes as well.”

“...Huh?” Sigrdrífa simpered out.

The fact that this came as a revelation belied she wasn’t the real Sigrdrífa.

“Phew... Ah!”

Mitsuki closed her eyes briefly, then reopened them with a short exhale. In her eyes shined runes in the shape of birds.

“Wha?!”

Sigrdrífa’s expression twisted in shock. But that wasn’t the end of it.

“Gwah!”

As though reacting to Mitsuki’s twin runes, sword-shaped golden runes appeared in Sigrdrífa’s eyes.

Then—

“Ah!”

“Mrraah! Gaaaaah?!”

The pair covered their eyes in unison.

Mitsuki gritted her teeth and bore it, but it appeared to take Sigrdrífa completely by surprise, as she screamed and curled up.

Resonance of the Twin Runes. It was a mysterious effect that had happened in their dreams.

Hot!

Sigrdrífa woke from the sudden heat coursing through her body. Ásmegin flowed through her like a raging current. She briefly wondered what had happened, but then recalled where she had felt this before.

Yes, when she had met Mitsuki in her dreams.

Gaaaaaaah!

Unexpectedly, she heard a raspy, creepy scream from within her. A glance showed Hárbarth writhing in agony. She felt a sense of satisfaction, then quickly felt that something was off.

Where am I...?

Looking around, she saw the colorless shade of the Valaskjálf Palace gardens. It was a familiar sight. This was Sigrdrífa’s own mind.

Why are you here?! Hárbarth! Sigrdrífa shouted with an intense rush of anger.

To be trampled on by this ugly fossil in reality was bad enough; to have him step into this last sanctuary within herself drove her into an incandescent fury.

Gaaaah! N-Nrrgh?! That woke you?! Hárbarth spat out angrily, having noticed that she had awoken.

She didn't know what was happening, but Sigrdrífa realized something was clearly wrong. All the while, further rage was pouring out from her like an erupting volcano.

Get out! This is my mind!

With an angry shout, she firmly rejected him.

But Hárbarth, having recovered from his agonized writhing, appeared to have regained his composure and smirked at her.

I refuse. This body is mine now.

Damn you, if you won't leave, I'll force you... Mrgh?!

As she tried to grab Hárbarth, Sigrdrífa realized that her body—her consciousness—was bound by something that appeared to be strings of light.

This is... Gleipnir?!

Heheh, as you could very well have woken up, I made sure you were securely tied down between layers of my seiðrs.

Hárbarth let out a vile laugh.

Gleipnir was a seiðr that Sigrdrífa was particularly good at wielding, one used to bind the supernatural. Even an Einherjar would have their powers tied down by this seiðr, but that was only true of your average Einherjar.

Hrmph! Who do you think I am? Do you possibly believe your seiðr is able to hold my twin runes back?

With that, Rífa tried to channel her ásmegin to tear at the binds of light—

Mrgh?!

However, she was shocked to find that the ásmegin she wielded much like an

extension of herself refused to respond. No matter how many times she tried, there was no sign of it gathering.

Wh-What is going...?!

Bwahahaha!

Upon seeing Sigrdrífa's panic, Hárbarth cackled in twisted enjoyment. It was an awful sound that assaulted her ears. She tried to tear the binds from herself in her rage, but they refused to move.

As Sigrdrífa struggled, Hárbarth quirked his lips in a smirk.

You're wasting your time. As I've said, this body is mine. As are your twin runes.

Urrrgh!

Sigrdrífa growled at Hárbarth, lashing at him with her rage.

Just what had happened to her?

She had been collaborating with Mitsuki to summon Yuuto, and having overexerted herself, had exhausted her power—

And that's where her memory stopped.

From what she gathered, it seemed that during that time, this horrid wretch of an old man had taken over her body. A renewed sense of rage bubbled up within her.

Damn you! Remove these bonds! Remove them at once! Sigrdrífa shrieked angrily, but Hárbarth merely gave her a cold, almost pitying smile.

Hrmph. Why would I obey, hm? Without the title of þjóðann or your power, all you are is a spoiled brat. You should know your place.

Mrrrph!

Upon hearing his statement of vulgar dismissal, tears began to fall from Sigrdrífa's eyes.

She wasn't afraid. She was simply mortified. After all, it was true.

Yes, all she had was her title as þjóðann and the twin runes. Both of those

things had been given to her by her ancestors. They were not something she had acquired on her own.

And now, without those things, she had nothing.

A body wracked with albinism. The anomalous appearance of having white hair and red eyes. A weak constitution that meant she couldn't even walk under the glare of the sun.

Her personality? Self-centered, selfish, arrogant. There was nothing to praise her for in that department. She was well aware of all of that.

Now, back to sleep you go.

Hárbarth approached and extended his hand to her. She wanted to run, but she couldn't move.

Someone! Someone help me, please! Fagrahvél!

She called out for her milk-sister, the one person who had always helped her. Yes, she was the one who had made Sigrdrífa's life bearable. Though even if Fagrahvél had the rune of kings, she couldn't imagine that Fagrahvél would be able to save her here.

Still, she wanted her help.

Give up. No one will come this far to save you.

Hárbarth's hand grabbed Sigrdrífa's face. She felt her strength being drained, her consciousness slipping away. She was afraid. She felt that if she went to sleep now she would never wake up. She didn't want everything to end here, not at this age, not now.

Help me! Yuuto!

In a last gasp, she called out the name of the man she loved!

It was at that moment...

"Fimbulvetr!"

A voice she'd never heard before rang out, and the light binding Sigrdrífa's body tore away.

Having regained her freedom, Sigrdrífa refused to tolerate this man grasping

at her heart a moment longer.

You have been here long enough! Begone you knave!

With her shout, power flowed from her spirit and lashed out at Hárbarth.

Gwah?! D-Damn yooooou!

With a dying curse, Hárbarth's spirit was blasted into the air and eventually faded away.

"Mm... where... am I...?"

When Sigrdrífa opened her eyes, there was an unfamiliar ceiling and two familiar faces peering down at her. Their eyes were full of concern and anxiety.

It seemed she was being held by the man she loved.

"Ahh, such fondly remembered faces, together again."

She honestly wondered if she was in heaven. She knew intuitively that this was real, but that was how she felt.

Sigrdrífa was the þjóðann and was thus a "special" individual. Because of that, everyone looked upon her with a certain aloofness. There was a certain emotional distance she could never close.

In spite of that, however, there was a warmth in the gazes of those present who looked upon her. It was a comforting warmth, and she felt her heart glow.

"Lord Yuuto, it seems you were able to safely return to these lands."



“Ah?!”

Yuuto and Mitsuki briefly widened their eyes as if in surprise, then their faces broke out in happy smiles.

“Lady Rífa, it’s been a while. Since your visit to lárarviðr, in fact.”

“Mm, indeed. Now, where am I? It doesn’t appear to be Valaskjálf,” Sigrdrífa asked, turning her eyes to her surroundings and glancing around.

It was a room she’d never seen before.

“We’re in Sigtuna.”

“Mm? Ah, so we’re in Sword Clan territory. Is Fagrahvél here?”

“Oh, I’ll go get her!”

The girl who looked just like her, Mitsuki, jumped up and hurriedly left the room.

Yuuto watched her leave, then asked the question that had been on his mind ever since his return to Yggdrasil.

“May I ask? How did you bring me back to this world?”

“Hm? Hrrm... Honestly, I don’t recall. My memories from then to now are completely blank.”

“I... see.”

“But before I awoke, I saw that Hárbarth was infesting my mind. He, no doubt, took over my body and was doing as he wished. Such an irritating man.”

Sigrdrífa spat out the name as though it were poison.

Yuuto, meanwhile, frowned apologetically.

“Seems I asked too much of you, I’m sorry.”

“Worry not, it’s over now. As you’re here, I take it you won that war? Are those we shared a stew pot with doing well?”

“Yes, thanks to you.”

“That gladdens my heart. It would be nice to see them again.”

“A few of them are around. Shall I call them?”

“That can wait. For now, tell me what happened after I lost consciousness.”

“All right.”

So, Sigrdrífa learned of recent events from Yuuto and found herself thoroughly surprised.

“Remarkable! Winter already approaches! Such a long time to sleep. In that sense, I suppose I should thank Hárbarth? Though, I have no intention of doing so.”

She snorted in displeasure.

It was true that she was alive thanks to him, but her irritation outweighed all else. She couldn't help but feel that old man had brought nothing but misfortune to her.

“Still, who was it that cast that Fimbulvetr?”

Without that, she would have been thrown back into a deep sleep.

She hadn't taught Fimbulvetr to Mitsuki though, and Felicia clearly didn't have the power to undo Hárbarth's seiðrs.

“Ah, well, you were obviously not yourself and someone else was controlling you. I called her in as she is easily the most qualified person for the job.”

As he spoke, Yuuto pointed to a beautiful dark-skinned, silver-haired woman standing behind Mitsuki who gave off a bewitching and captivating aura. Her appearance, and her skill with seiðrs that allowed her to wield Fimbulvetr, matched the rumors Sigrdrífa had heard.

“Could it be... Are you Sigyn?”

“Yes. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty.”

The dark-skinned beauty, Sigyn, bowed respectfully.

Sigrdrífa gazed at her in wonderment as the pieces clicked into place.

Sigyn was a heroine who had served as patriarch of the Panther Clan despite being a woman, one of the five greatest seiðr practitioners in all of Yggdrasil, known as the Witch of Miðgarðr.

“You had taught me that Fimbulvetr was a seiðr that would free one from all limitations.”

Yuuto quirked his lips up in a cocky smile and closed one eye in a wink.

Yes, she recalled saying something to that effect to him.

“Heh, even Hárbarth could do nothing when faced with you!”

While Sigrdrífa hadn’t quite grasped the situation, it was that clever old bastard after all. No doubt he had used all the tools and schemes at his disposal to advance his machinations.

Yuuto had smashed those schemes to pieces by playing an overwhelming hand that contained an impossible combination: the resonance of the twin runes and Sigyn, the Witch of Miðgarðr.

It was true this victory was due to the power of other people, but no king truly rules alone. It was an accomplishment made possible by the charisma to draw that sort of talent to him, that is, the character of a conqueror.

Looking at him closely, he had grown taller since she saw him six months ago, and he was far more distinguished than he had been.

As to be expected of the man I fell in love with, Sigrdrífa thought, as she opened her mouth to speak.

“It seems you’ve grown quite a bit in the time I hadn’t seen you. Swallowing up the Panther Clan, the Sword Clan, and now the empire itself. Things have truly turned out as the prophecy claimed.”

“The agreement wasn’t by your will, Lady Rífa. Are you all right with it? Though I guess we’ve come too far to stop now.”

Again Yuuto looked apologetic, and Sigrdrífa burst out laughing. The conqueror of Yggdrasil was such an honest and honorable young man, which is why she fell for him.

Sigrdrífa gazed intently at Yuuto before going on to make her grand statement.

“That’s quite all right. The empire has served its purpose. From here on, the age of the Steel Clan begins. Let us go to the Holy Capital of Gláðsheimr. Step

proudly through its gate as its new master.”

EPILOGUE

“By the gods, such an overwhelming surge of ásmegin...” Hárbarth spat out bitterly from a room within Valaskjálf Palace.

The Steel Clan Reginarch’s first wife appeared, and then the twin runes ran wild. As a result, Sigrdrífa had been roused from her coma. Considering that he’d gone so far as to offer up his own head for the sake of this scheme, it was an unexpected setback.

“I am glad I made the decision to prepare a spare,” Hárbarth said with a dry laugh, stretching the neck of his new body.

There was no telling when the next þjóðann would be born. His old body might very well have given out before then.

Even if he took over the next þjóðann, he wouldn’t be able to act as a baby, which was why he’d prepared this body as a temporary vessel for that contingency.

“While it hurts to have lost the þjóðann’s body, no doubt they now think that I’ve died and let down their guard.”

They’d cut off his old body’s head and banished him from Sigrdrífa. He had also made it appear to her that he’d been vanquished.

“No, Black One. You’ll not cheat me out of years of preparation...!”

EPILOGUE II

Blíkjanda-Böl. The capital of the Flame Clan, who had now risen to control an enormous stretch of territory spanning the Helheim region in Southern Yggdrasil and Vanaheimr region in Southwestern Yggdrasil.

Gathered outside its gates was an enormous army numbering fifty thousand, all waiting impatiently for their patriarch's orders.

The patriarch, Oda Nobunaga, read a clay tablet from the empire with an amused expression.

"Ah, Ran. It seems the lad has exceeded expectations."

"...Indeed. To so easily turn back the tide that threatened to engulf him..."

The tablet noted that the empire had rescinded the Steel Clan subjugation order and that the þjóðann would become the Steel Clan's second queen.

Second queen. The words said everything.

Even in name, the þjóðann who had ruled Yggdrasil was forced to settle for being the second queen, meaning that the Anti-Steel Clan Alliance Army had been defeated and the empire had fallen to the Steel Clan. As a result of that, the Steel Clan had gained the legitimate authority to rule Yggdrasil by acquiring the þjóðann.

"Heh. This makes it all worthwhile."

He admitted that his opponent reaching the capital first was a point of frustration, but at the same time, it made the situation all the more interesting. The battle to control the world had yet to be decided.

Nobunaga himself had once installed Ashikaga Yoshiaki as shogun and assumed power through him, but the war with his neighboring lords only intensified after.

It was the same now. He had no intention of letting another rule the world and shunt him aside.

“Ran! We ride! We, the Flame Clan Army shall advance upon the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr!”

Afterword

Thank you for waiting so, so long.

It's been a long time. It's I, Seiichi Takayama.

The reason this volume was delayed is all upon my shoulders. I can only bow my head in apologies to my editor U-sama, my illustrator Yukisan-sensei, and all the other people involved with this world, and more than anything, to my readers. I'm truly, truly sorry.

To make my excuses, starting around summer of last year, I had a number of personal issues crop up and become increasingly serious, and from about December of last year to this last March, I was in no position to write.

For now, the various problems have been resolved, and now all the problems of that period seem like a long-gone nightmare. Thank you for your patience.

However, I suppose big problems do challenge your beliefs and cause you to rethink your priorities.

Ordinarily, you don't need to make those sort of big changes when you're 39, but last year was one where there were so many big changes that even I can't believe them myself. I'll try to make sure those experiences are reflected in my creative work.

I'll work hard to make sure I don't disrupt the pace of my writing! No, seriously.

Now, this is a personal matter, but this past spring, my daughter has gone from being in elementary school to middle school.

Seeing her at the commencement ceremony, I was overcome with a lot of emotion that we'd finally reached this point, and thought back to the struggles I'd had since I became a single father when she was two and struggled to raise her.

At this age, of course, she's now more independent and can do plenty on her own.

She's also getting to be a bit rebellious. (LOL)

This is a turning point for me as a parent.

I'd like to do my best to make it through the second half.

Now, I'd like to end with acknowledgments.

To my editor, U-sama. Thank you so much for putting up with all of the problems I had this time around, and thank you so very much for all of the concern and help you provided during that time!

To Yukisan-sensei, I'm very sorry to have opened a hole in your schedule given how busy you are. I'll do my sincere best to make sure this doesn't happen again in the future.

My thanks and apologies to all others involved.

And this time, to all the people who provided me with a sympathetic ear and offered advice in my times of crisis, particularly Mr. N and Mr. S! Thank you, thank you, thank you, from the bottom of my heart. It was thanks to you two that I was able to stand up again and keep going.

And finally, to all the readers that I kept waiting. I'm truly sorry for the delay.

Well then, I hope that we'll see each other again!

Seiichi Takayama









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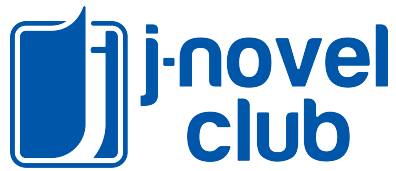
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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 13

by Seiichi Takayama

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